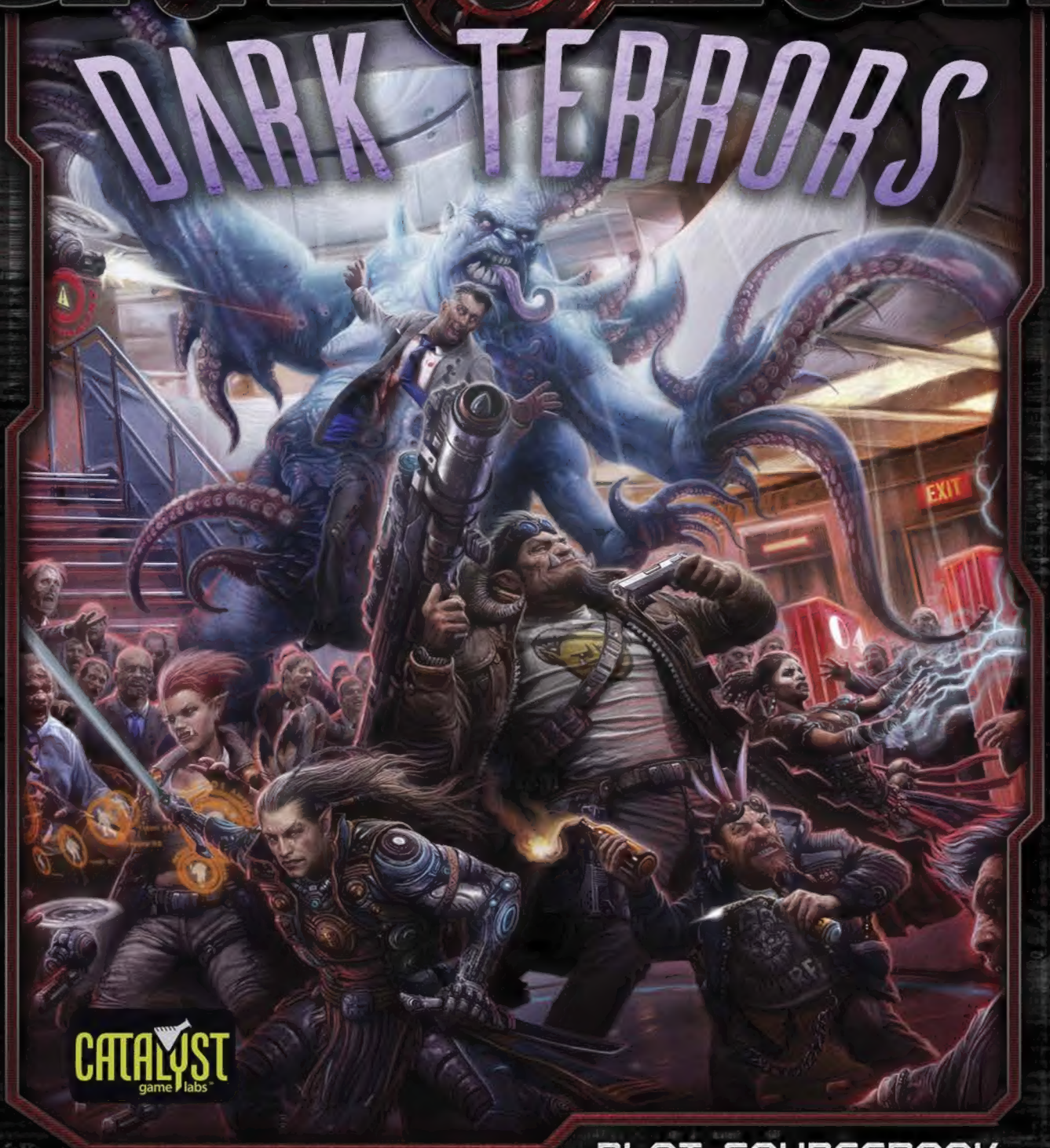
SHADOWRUN

DARK TERRORS



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PLOT SOURCEBOOK

EXIT
DARK TERRORS
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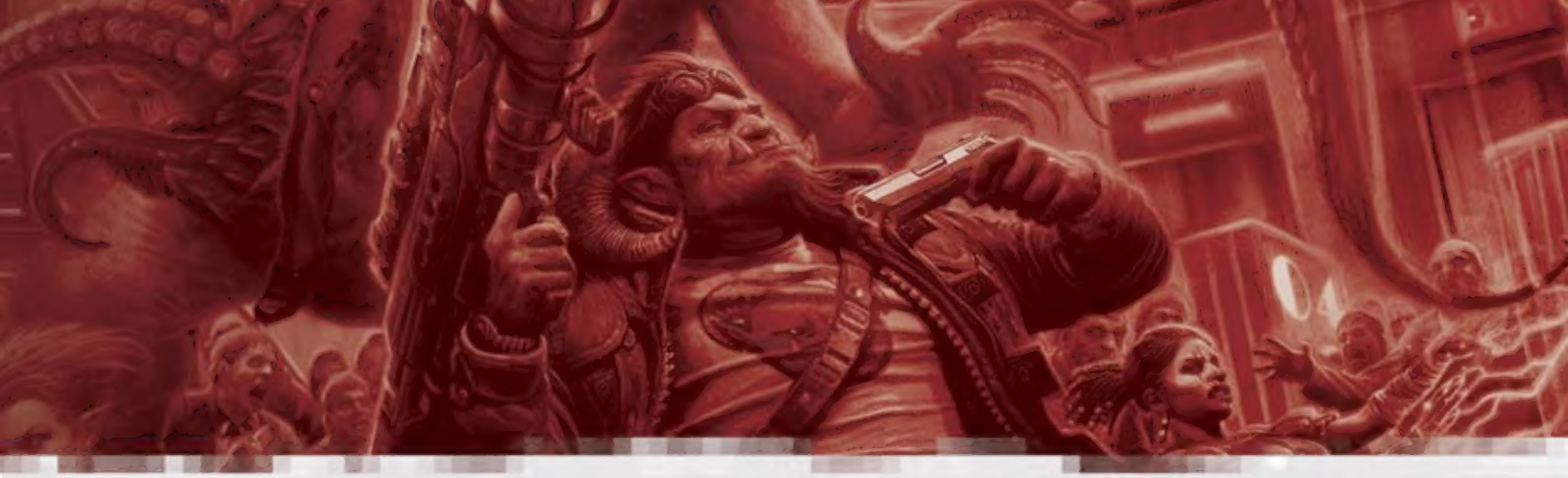

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JACKPOINT

CONNECTING TO JACKPOINT VPN...
...IDENTITY SPOOFED
...ENCRYPTION KEYS GENERATED
...CONNECTED TO ONION ROUTERS

>>>LOGIN: XXXXXXXXXXXXXX
>>>ENTER PASSCODE: XXXXXXXXXXXXXX
...BIOMETRIC SCAN CONFIRMED
YOU'RE IN. USE IT WELL.

"WORDS HAVE NO POWER TO IMPRESS THE MIND WITHOUT THE EXQUISITE HORROR OF THEIR REALITY." -EDGAR ALLEN POE

JACKPOINT STATS
64 Users are active on the network.

LATEST NEWS
- The calendar has been reset. It has now been 0 days since the last blood rain.

PERSONAL ALERTS
- You have 17 new private messages.
- You have 8 new responses to your JackPoint posts.
- The landlord said he could not determine what was causing the mysterious thumping under your floorboards.
- There are two Members online and in your area.
- Your Current Rep Score: 904 (77% positive)

Current Time: 17 Dec 2079, 0525 hrs

WELCOME BACK TO JACKPOINT, CHUMMER:
Your last connection was severed:18 hours, 44 minutes, 20 seconds ago.

TODAY'S HEADS UP
- The problem is not that there are scary things in the world. The problem is that they keep changing and adapting. –Glitch

INCOMING
- Some threats are of the more flesh-and-blood variety, but that doesn't make them any less of a problem. [Tag: Street Lethal]
- There are people who, despite everything, keep hope alive. Here are some of them. [Tag: Better than Bad]
- Fight for your life long enough, and you end up in Seattle. Weird. [Tag: Seattle Gambit]

TOP NEWS ITEMS
- Stark, Theissen, and Van der Mer acquisitions make them the third-largest law firm in the DeeCee area. Link
- Johnny Spinrad calls 2080 "The Year of Spinrad," has 365 days of celebration planned. Link
- Azania becomes 58th nation to officially label Fear the Dark as a terrorist organization. Link

INTRODUCTION

Shadowrunners, as a rule, are generally not afraid of the things that go bump in the night, since most of the time, they *are* those things. Still, when you're out there enough among the other people and beings who prefer to remain unseen, one unfortunate truth becomes increasingly clear: There are more dark dangers than most of the comfortable wageslaves of the world would ever dream about.

Knowing your opponent is a critical part of shadowrunning, but runners who have been around the block a few times know that understanding the mysterious forces of the world is about more than knowing who you might go up against; it might also be about knowing the people and things that are going to be sending work your way. After all, who is smart enough to know who is ultimately behind every job that comes your way—or rich enough to turn away good-paying work just because the money is coming from an unsavory source? The Sixth World is a complex place, and *Dark Terrors* is your guide to understanding some of the more mysterious parts of it.

It starts with *The Heart of the Hive,* providing new information about an old threat: bug spirits, and the people who hunt them. Next comes *Marooned Spirits*, discussing the strange plight of the shedim, spirits who animate the bodies of the dead and who have lost the connection to their home plane. Their plans are mysterious, but one thing is clear: They are not just going to sit back and accept their exile.

Speaking of mysterious plans, *Paint It Blacker* attempts to shine a light on the shadowiest of shadowy figures—the Black Lodge. Figuring out their ultimate ends is no easier than getting a clear idea who is in their thrall. That's followed by *Monads and CFD,* an update on one of the newer terrors—cognitive fragmentation disorder, and the head cases and monads who caught it. The good news is, the spread of the disease has been slowed, maybe halted. The bad news? The monads are still out there, working on whatever plans they have cooked up.

The next chapter takes a turn for the weird, looking at the tumult and chaos surrounding a murder trial in the Seelie Court that might have revealed *The Hidden Faction,* a group vying for power in the shadows of the Court that might about to be thrust into the light. Also gaining more exposure—likely far more than they would prefer—are *Followers of the Elder God*, mysterious cultists and the even more mysterious beings they worship. And before you think the Matrix might be a refuge from all this chaos, *Dwellers of the Deep Foundations* has some bad news for you. The Foundations of the Matrix are a considerable mystery, and the mysteries of the Sixth World almost never turn out to be anything pleasant,

Finally, the book journeys to some places that provide shelter to those who may be pushed aside in other areas. *The Ghoul Queen and Her People* offers an update on the Infected kingdom of Asamando, as well as a look at changes that have been seen in many Infected. Finally, *Untamed Metaplanes* wanders to some of the wild and woolly spots outside our home material plane, and discusses what might be encountered by those brave enough to venture into them.

Shadowrunners don't need to be looking for new threats—they're skilled at finding danger around the next corner of whatever sprawl they're in—but they need to understand what's out there, and what lurks in the night. With this guide, they might learn enough to stay alive one more night—or know the nature of the thing that devours them.

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DARKER THAN SHADOWS

Vaquita drummed her fingers on the velvet armrest. "I never intended this to become a specialty."

"I understand," said Mr. Johnson, sipping at his bone-china mug, his grey pin-striped suit only one soothing element among many in the natural-fiber-filled flat with a view of the Thames. "But I believe it was your intention to get paid, was it not? So here you are."

"You know there are teams that offer more firepower, don't you?"

"Ms. Vaquita, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to talk your way out of this job."

Vaquita's mouth said, "Of course not," but her mind said, *Maybe I am.*

"Besides, the elimination of the creatures is hardly the most difficult part of this mission. Once you're among them, you may simply plant explosives and leave, or what have you. You do not have to take any care at all for the condition of the area in which they will be found. The whole area can be destroyed." Another sip. "Ideally once you have departed, of course."

"Setting off explosives isn't as easy as you think, especially underground. We want to leave ourselves a way out."

Mr. Johnson waved his hand, French cuffs emerging from under his suit jacket. "The specific niceties are up to you. Money is on the table. Are you prepared to leave it there?"

The most significant problems about taking a meeting in a townhome near the Tower Bridge were first, that Vaquita felt uncomfortable and out of place the whole time, and second, that Strummer couldn't look her in the eye when she came back.

"I think our best bet is to ride the Underground for a while. That means limited weapons, Tumble. No scaring people. You too, Chain."

"I'm my best weapon, and I carry me everywhere."

Vaquita had learned that working with Chainmaker meant letting her more grandiose pronouncements go by without argument, or even acknowledgement.

"Strummer, we'll need spirits on the lookout for anything we can use. We can be nice to them, keep them entirely out of harm's reach. Even tell them they can blink off at the sight of danger. How many spirits do you think we'll need? Strummer?" She snapped her fingers three times. "Strummer!"

Strummer's long, tight face was slightly upturned, and only his eyes moved toward her. "What kind of tea was served?"

Vaquita was ready with an answer, because she knew the question would be asked. "Darjeeling first flush, aged five years, full leaf, from the East India Company."

Strummer closed his eyes. He might have fallen into a dream. "You should have taken me there."

"I wasn't told I could bring a guest."

"Did you ask? Did you *try*?"

BY JASON M. HARDY

"Ghost *dammit*, if we do this job, I'll buy everyone tea and we'll drink it on the banks of the bloody Thames. Can we focus?"

Vaqiuta tried not to look as abashed as she felt after the outburst. Strummer kept his eyes closed and did not move his face. But when Vaquita said, "How many ...?," he quickly replied, "Four. I will have them tomorrow."

With that, they had a plan.

They did their ride at two in the morning, which is one of the few times Vaquita felt comfortable on the tube. During the day, she felt like she was surrounded by aliens. All those people with clothes they had bought new within the last year, people who thought nothing of spending five nuyen to get where they were going and another five to get back home. Ten nuyen a day. There had been times when that was more than Vaquita had spent in an entire week. Or month. So to be surrounded by people who spent it thoughtlessly, day after day—it was quite bizarre.

She never understood why they could have a regular source of income and look so pained, so haunted.

In the middle of the night, though, the train was mostly empty, and the people who were riding didn't fit most definitions of "normal." There were people sleeping on the seats, people moving from one car to another, and people with red-rimmed, vacant eyes who had some business to conduct but you didn't dare ask what. They all had different versions of a fuck-off stare, and they all used that expression constantly. Any given train car was like a mini-United Nations that consisted solely of representatives of countries who were currently at war with each other. That felt natural to Vaquita, so she could ride with them.

She had a micro-drone at the front of the train, transmitting sporadically just so the rail authorities wouldn't catch a hint that she was working a drone inside the tube. For some reason, they tended to get edgy about such things. It would alert her if it detected any strange movement in the tunnels ahead of the train, but most of the work was going to be done by Strummer's spirits. More drones were in her pocket. They should be of use later.

They had done the whole expanse of the District line and were now on the Northern. The spirits had been given clear instructions of stay out of sight to avoid spooking the other riders, so they couldn't just appear and share information with Vaquita. She would not know anything until Strummer told her.

That happened just past London Bridge. Strummer rose slowly, as was his way, and said "The next one is our stop." Vaquita just nodded. There was no use in asking for more information; they weren't going to talk about anything where a member of the public could hear about it. And if they had information, they'd need to be off the train anyway.

They got off at Bank, then they had a procedure to follow that Strummer insisted upon. They left the station, walked slowly up the stairs, and stopped. No one was around, because of course they weren't at this time of night. Strummer cast his magic there. "The cameras want to make a complete chain from when you exit the train to when you ascend the stairs," Strummer had said. "After that, you're meaningless to them." Invisibility took their images out of this world, and the four of them drifted back down the stairs.

Vaquita always felt like she was moving lightly when she was invisible, but it was important for her to remember she was not a ghost. She would hit the gates if she continued forward, not pass through them. That was the first obstacle here—getting past the gate without making so much noise that anyone would hear. For some reason, while Strummer handled invisibility well, his silence spells tended to be leaky and unreliable, especially when he was already sustaining spells. The team knew this, though, and they had workarounds—four of them, this time.

The spirits Strummer had summoned did not materialize or manifest, but they came charging down the stairs of the station with an assembly of plastic bags, pop cans, and miscellaneous fast food containers. They rattled, clanked, and otherwise made enough noise that four people could lightly climb over or slide under the gates without being heard over the din. Another obstacle surmounted. They continued down the stairs, onto the platform, then down onto the tracks. As the lights of the platform faded behind them, Strummer shared what the spirits had told him.

"The spirits saw life forms at King William Street Station. That is not unusual. Some of them, though, were Awakened. The spirits did not investigate closer, due to the instructions I had given them. That is where we stand."

"Spellslingers underground. I get it. Spirits gone now?"

"Their debt is fulfilled."

"I humbly submit that you should request the service of more."

Strummer nodded.

Tumbledown had the lead as the team walked, followed by Chainmaker, then Strummer, then Vaquita. The ork stopped after they had walked maybe a block and a half. "Got a spot for me?"

Vaquita had downloaded a schematic of the station (through wireless signals passed along by drones waiting in the tunnels behind her—what was she, an amateur?). "Ventilation shaft past the barrier. Which should not be a barrier for us, right, Strummer?"

"The first group of spirits said their services were complete. I am not so rude as to doubt them to their faces."

Walking to the old King William Street station should not be possible, but Strummer had the sense to summon an earth spirit as part of his recon group. That spirit had kindly rearranged the concrete barrier blocking the access tunnel, leaving a hole large enough for even Tumbledown to climb through. They proceeded into it quickly, and then they were away from potential trains and into complete darkness.

It would not be alleviated by either spells or tech for the time being. Chainmaker would use her thermo vision, Tumbledown had his low-light. The two humans would need help; Vaquita had contacts with both low-light and thermo ("suck it, metas" was something she thought but didn't say when she put them in), while Strummer would rely on astral sight to alert him to anything living. Which made him the most likely to be tripped up be something inanimate, but as it turned out he was surprisingly nimble.

It also turned out that for the first portion of the journey, neither of the visual aids Vaquita was using helped much. There was nothing that gave off more heat than any other thing, so thermographic vision was mostly uniform. And low-light vision was nice, but it didn't offer much to see in no-light conditions. She kept waiting for her eyes to adjust to the light, but what light? So she moved carefully and waited to see if the drones walking on the walls and ceiling near her caught any more than she did.

They didn't. Neither did she. Or any member of the team. While they were walking, She had an ARO—a nice, bright ARO, that of course shed no actual light on her surroundings—that placed her movements in the plans she had obtained. It helped her get up on the platform and determine when she was coming toward the end of it. If she was at the end of it, that unfortunately meant that she hadn't found a damn thing.

"We haven't found a damn thing," she muttered into her comm.

"Thanks for saying, because I didn't know, because I haven't been five meters in front of you this whole time, have I?" She could hear Tumbledown both over the comm and echoing in the tunnel around her. He didn't seem to worry about being heard. Having seen nothing, Vaquita couldn't say that he was wrong.

"Strummer, any signs of anything?"

"Would there be any circumstance where I would have seen something and not told you?"

"So if a spellslinger was here, they didn't sling any spells. Not recently."

"What concerns me is the lack of wards."

Vaquita waited to see if Strummer would provide any more elucidation. Fortunately, he did.

"If you have an Awakened protecting a secret lair, then one of the more reasonable things to do is make a ward. Yet we see no evidence of that."

"And that's strange, if we think there is some sort of hive near here. And if there isn't, what would any of them be doing here?"

It was a good question, but it was not to be answered, because Chainmaker broke in. "Life."

"Where?"

"Over the exit. Crouched, or lying down. Like they've got a sniper's nest or something."

"And they've almost certainly heard us. No surprise for us. Okay, let's plan."

Planning quickly commenced.

Light. Glorious light filled the chamber. Warm, yellow, like a skylight had been opened to the sort of sun London saw maybe three times per year. There were shadows, contrasts, three dimensions. And of course, there was movement.

Rats. Many rats, scurrying because it was quite possible they had never seen so much light in their lives. And movement up by the tunnel leaving the station. With noise. Words, maybe, though tough to make out.

"Wharrrrr what, what, what izzit? Light, who turned on a light, where is a light? Howsa light? Where? Where? Wherrrrrre?"

There was some kicking, some thrashing, but that was it. No standing. No climbing. The voice—it was low and raspy—sounded surprised, but other emotions were difficult to suss out. Fear? Anger? Did it matter?

"Strummer, would a spirit be able to have a look at what's up there?" Once, years ago, Vaquita had said, "Have a spirit go look at the door," and the job had been delayed for five minutes while Strummer explained that spirits were neither their servants nor slaves. She had been careful to never repeat that mistake again.

"Foxglove is examining the situation," Strummer said. There was only a short pause, as spirits move at the speed of thought. "There is a male human up there, lying on a makeshift platform, legs wrapped in ..."

"In what?"

Strummer raised his shoulders helplessly. "Fibers of some sort."

"Fibers? Ghost, he might be stored up there. A snack for later. Get him ..." Vaquita paused. "If they would, bringing down the man from that platform would be gracious."

Strummer raised an eyebrow. Perhaps she was laying it on a little too thick.

The spirit materialized for this bit of work, looking like an Underground conductor from the middle of the twentieth century, with a black jacket and dark red cap. Perhaps it thought that would be soothing. The kicking of the man as the spirit floated him down from the platform indicated it was not soothing enough.

His legs were actually kicking more than Vaquita expected. Food was usually bound up tighter. His arms were almost entirely free. As was his mouth.

"Unhand me, ya churlish malcontent! I'll scoop out yer eyeballs and serve them with mint jelly! Get those hands off me and stick them up your arse!" The yelling continued in that vein well after the spirit set him down on the platform.

"Sir," Vaquita said, but the word was lost in the ongoing bluster. "Sir, who put you up there?"

The man brushed rags from his feet and stood.

Rags. Cloth. That was the fiber on his legs. Nothing else.

"Assense him," Vaquita said, then yelled over Strummer's forming objection. "Assense him!"

Strummer didn't have time to deliver the full verdict—"He's Awaken—" was all that came out—when the man gave a shout, jumped to his feet, and the lights in the tunnel went off in a blink.

The man wanted darkness. Grand. Never give them what they want.

"Light!" she yelled, and she pulled her rifle off her back, turning on the barrel-mounted light with a mental command. The beam swept up with the barrel, and there was motion by the walls. She swept back to see it, but it had moved on, with scuttling and clicking.

Strummer cast a light spell, which was snuffed out almost instantly. But it revealed more movement. And more important, trajectories. Another light went on—Tumbledown's?—only to be knocked out of his hands. The torch sat near the wall, showing mainly a single patch of concrete, but the reflected light was a touch more than nothing. She thought she saw enough to fire. So she did. No cries of pain or sounds of something collapsing rewarded her.

Then the spirits. Light flashed from them, strobe-like, illuminating motion in jerks. Motion of multi-fold limbs, clacking mandibles, lunges and swipes.

Vaquita saw motion coming close, so she sprang. Her drones were all over, plotting movement whenever they spotted it. Four beings who were not part of her team—the man from the perch and three ... others. The clearest path was to her left. She rolled, felt her shoulder pass the edge of the platform. But she didn't fall. The movement was precise.

Something passed within a meter. It smelled of rotten coconut.

She was back on her feet quickly. The skidding near her told her course adjustments were happening.

More flashes. Movement, reaching, mouth open, with a hiss.

Then a cry, a thump, and light.

To her right, the man from the platform lay on the tracks. He was out. His attempts to maintain darkness were done.

But she couldn't worry about that, because the thing was closer. It was brown, translucent. Lumps, pustules the size of pears, dotted its head. They were translucent, too; she imagined she could see fluid whirling inside. Its mandibles flapped eagerly, but the real problems were the four legs on the ground and the two that stretched forward, grasping for her. But she had her shot.

Bullets out. Easy shots. Hit, hit, hit. Blood or ichor flying. A pustule exploded. She had no word for what came out. She wanted never to know what it was called.

There was screaming, from its mouth, from the hissing of the wounds, from her, from everywhere. A nearby flash was the movement of Chainmaker's blade. More spirits had materialized, with flowing coats and wild knives, appearing even less genteel than a pack of Whitehall pickpockets. Strummer stood with his customary stiffness, giving the fire flowing from his fingers a regal air. And Tumbledown had a squirming insect over his head, a roar in his throat, and a clear regret that the tracks he was going to throw the thing onto were not electrified.

That left the shaman, the vagrant who had been squatting on the platform. He was nowhere to be seen. He had come to, then probably scrambled for a nearby escape hatch. They'd have to track him. She'd have Strummer talk the spirits into helping on that the job as penance for the fact that they had not seen through the shaman's masking, letting him appear normal for too many precious seconds. She hoped that capturing the shaman could bring a little bonus.

The bugs had gotten the jump on them, but Vaquita's crew was ready. They had done this sort of thing before. She'd walk away from this intact.

And one step closer to earning the title of professional bug hunter.

THE HEART OF THE HIVE

- Approximately six hours ago, I received another data packet containing several audio files and from our wayward bounty hunter chummer Sticks. After running the usual security checks to make sure there weren't any hidden surprises, I gave an initial listen and ran them through a transcription program for our collective benefit. Some go back several months, and below are the raw transcripts with minimal editing, although there were some problems that the program couldn't work out. The raw audio files are available on request. And if you need a prologue, check out what Sticks wrote about Ares in the *Cutting Aces* download.
- Glitch

<OPEN AUDIO FILE TRANSCRIPT: #0313-01-A>

Begin recording.

I've tried to think of a thousand different ways to start, to figure out exactly what needs to be said that'll convey the immense gravity of the situation at hand. And frag if I haven't deleted more than as many drafts. Ghost, I don't even know if I can do this justice. But I have to at least try. Someone has to. But being in the middle of a massive drek storm tends to muck with things.

And for the record, I decided to put these in audio form so they can be quickly transcribed and instantly uploaded to a secure node linked to my JackPoint account with a programmed auto-transmit function that'll send the latest and any subsequent files if I don't upload a new one after forty-eight hours of inactivity or send a stand-down command.

If nothing else, believe me when I say that this paydata has to get out. The situation is already fluid enough, and I'm constantly on the move, so I have to make do with the hand dealt. A lot of powerful and immensely slotted-off people are now gunning for me, and I still have a lot of work to do, hopefully before someone ...

<10 second pause, unidentified background sounds detected>

Frag, thought I had more time. I have to move. But I needed to get this started, even if I only get this one file out, I know others will pick up the ball and run with it.

If anything else, everyone needs to know that for a while now, Ares has secretly been at war with itself, which could lead to Armageddon for everyone ... and we barely noticed.

<Sound of firearm being loaded and round being chambered detected >

Gotta go. End recording.

- What the frag?
- Treadle

- Being dramatic for effect, or for a good reason?
- X-Prime

- Read on.
- Glitch

- Definitely got my attention.
- Cayman

<OPEN AUDIO FILE TRANSCRIPT: #0313-01-B>

Ouch ... let's try this again.

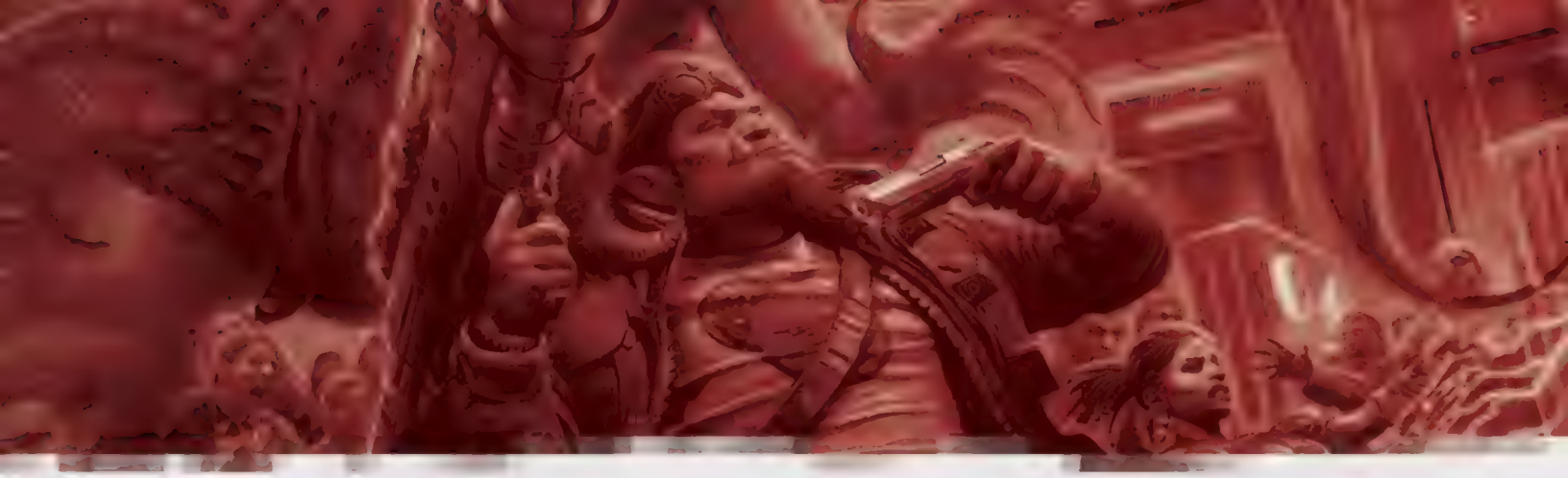
At the risk of sounding like a bad cliché: If you're listening to this, then you'll know I've managed to stay alive for at least a little while longer. Hooray me. But given what's going on within Ares and the big, fat neon target that's now affixed to my back, who knows how much longer that'll last?

Well, better make this a good one.

But where to start?

Current events are as good a place as any. As of this recording, I'm nursing several wounds in one of my few remaining safe houses downing pain-killers and cheap whiskey for drekfast ... wait, is that even a word? Frag it, it is now, put it in the book.

The first thing you may be asking is, "Gee-whiz,



Sticks, what do you mean about having a giant target on your back?" You see, boys and girls, your pal Sticks here, to paraphrase my dear departed grandpa, done fuckered up really fragging bad. But it'll take a bit to get to that part, because there's so much more important stuff to go over first. Context is important.

<125.9 second pause>

But still, despite everything that's happening, the funny thing is that in a sick and twisted way, I've never been happier.

- Okay, that's not at all disturbing.
- /dev/grrl

- Sticks? Disturbed? Never would have guessed.
- Netcat

- I think someone is fragging with us. We need to authenticate these files. I can't believe you're posting all this without doing so first, Glitch.
- Rigger X

- Oh for the love of ... this isn't the first time we've worked with raw data, won't be the last. And I'm not doing your damn work for you. For someone who's profited several times over from the paydata provided by this VPN, under *very* dubious circumstances I might add, you've been pushing a lot of buttons of late. But you're welcome to use or ignore these as you see fit. And don't forget, you can also leave at any time, *omae*.
- Glitch

I'll bet after that last statement, a lot of people are questioning my sanity, and I don't blame them. If roles were reversed, I would. But this time, I'm gonna open up on why I'm doing this, done everything, while I have time.

<81 second pause, unidentified background sounds detected>

Ugh, someone must have made this stuff with turpentine.

My hatred for the bugs is almost legendary. Everything I've done, everything, has been to get into position where I can do my part to end the bug menace once and for all. That's why I made myself indispensable to Ares, because they were the only ones who were actively dealing with the threat. Yeah, go ahead and debate that all you want, but when was the last time one of the other megas took out a major hive without cannon fodder from a puppet government or mercenary unit?

By working for Ares, I was helping end that threat, even if it was a small way. Even though I sold large chunks of my soul along the way, I was *doing something*. I'm still a certified bastard, but a bastard with a purpose and goal. And I *<audio error, 2.2 MP of data corrupted>* ... Ares betrayed all of us! I get the concept of fighting fire *with* fire, but you don't emulate evil, you don't become the alien, you *destroy it utt... <audio error, 1.1 MP of data corrupted>* ...erwise, what are we fighting for?

That's where Ares crossed the line, and I put responsibility squarely on Damien Knight's shoulders. He's no hero—that part of him died a long time ago. Now he's another would-be tyrant, and everyone else is a pawn. SOP for sure, but not with something like this, *never for something like this ...*

<240.3 second pause, unidentified sounds detected, sound of shattering glass detected>

Okay, drekfast with a side order of semi-drunken rant done. Get back on track, get your head back in the game. Channel the rage, channel the anger ...

<20.1 second pause, heavy breathing sound detected>

Now, where was I? Oh, yeah ...

After Chicago, I took some time and ignored calls from all of my Mr. Johnsons, both Ares and other. The former because I didn't want to deal with them combined with a healthy dose of paranoia, the latter because I could. After a week

processing what I'd seen there through a thick filter of booze—because there was no way my brain could have handled it otherwise—I sobered up and realized I needed a plan.

First on the agenda, make sense of what the frag I'd seen in Chicago and why Ravenheart let me live. It's an open secret that Ares has been working on new and inventive ways to kill bugs, and has been for decades. And I knew a bit more than most about some of the surfaces Ares was scratching. I'd heard the rumors, seen the paydata from multiple sources. Some of it even seemed sensible. I mean, why should anyone really care about how the bugs are obliterated? They're a threat, and threats need to be eliminated.

- Considering previous statements, that's some serious pot calling the kettle black.
- Pistons

So why can't I get that mutated, that perverted, that troll's *bug* face out of my mind? I've seen all kinds of merge levels, from the worst to the best, the grotesque to the so-called perfect. I've splattered more than my fair share of bug brains over the years and never lost an iota of sleep over it. Hell, most of the time I slept better.

But why did this one get under my skin so bad? Why is it still front and center every fragging time I close my eyes? And why can't I shake that feeling of <*audio error, 1.2 MP of data corrupted*> ... under my skin, just like when Brother <*audio error, 1.8 MP of data corrupted*> ... invading my body! I was helpless, those monsters forcing <*audio error, 0.5 MP of data corrupted*> ... forced too?! It had to be, no one would volunteer for such ...

Ahhhhhhhh!

<*Sigh detected*>

Anyway, it was time to start getting some answers. I figured I had four main questions. The first one was obvious: Why was Ares hunting Firewatch? What would cause Ares to go after their best weapon against the bugs? Damien Knight is a lot of things, but stupid isn't one of them. He may not technically be Ares' top dog, at least publicly, but don't think for a second that he's lost any of his power. Nothing happens in that corp without his permission.

- Maybe that's just it; maybe Knight has what he considers *better* weapons.
- Beaker
- Disturbing thought, but you're likely dead on.
- Hard Exit

Second: What's changed? Hard truth is that change doesn't happen for its own sake; something *makes* it happen. What started these dominos falling? Way I figure it, something already happened, something is about to happen, or someone is planning on *making* something happen. Maybe all the above? Maybe it's already started? Either way, it's something that I ... no, *we* need to know about.

Third: Why did Ravenheart let me live? She could have easily tied up a major loose threat with zero effort in Chicago, but she didn't. By all accounts, I was loyal to Ares and there on a job to bag one of her own, ergo a direct threat to her. The smart thing would have been to splatter my brains and leave my carcass for devil-rat chow. But she didn't. She didn't.

- The fork in the road is not just for those who are walking the path, but for those who have come before and yet to do so.
- Man-of-Many-Names

And fourth, which ventures into personal territory: How exactly does Otto Hendricks fit into the mix? No matter what else happens, if I get even the slightest chance of putting that bastard into the ground, for real and permanent-like, all of this will all be worth ...

<*Audible alarm sounds in background*>

Well, drek on a stick, someone found me already. Time to go, *again*. I'll pick this up later and explain. End recording.

<OPEN AUDIO FILE TRANSCRIPT: #0313-02-A>

<*Audio error, ambient background interference 35 percent*>

Begin recording. And sorry in advance for the noise. Can't be helped. Life never works on your timetable or plans. All we can do is adapt. And for anyone curious to what happened at the end of the last file, let's just say when a shadowrunner team is hell-bent on giving you a permanent case of dead, it wakes you up in the morning. Kind of ironic.

Bet the stupid fraggers thought that after our last encounter, I was a nice, easy, wounded target. Which is damn insulting. If they had any

brains or done their homework, they might have known better. But now *they've* got permanent detention in hell courtesy of another runner team. This particular team is one of my primary go-tos for backup and or protection when I'm in ... well, never mind that. And I pay them *extremely* well for their services and loyalty. How much? When I call, they drop everything.

What else do you think I spend my cred on? I don't have expensive tastes, I don't use a lot of 'ware, and I'm sensible about gear. But mostly I'm fond of living, so I've created layers of insurance worldwide for just such emergencies.

Good thing, because I've already burned through most of it.

- Anyone know what that ghost-awful noise in the background is? I downloaded the raw audio and played with my sound filters for twenty minutes just to hear the bloody thing.
- Chainmaker

- That, chummer, is the sound of aircraft engines. By the sound of it, an older GMC Banshee, Block-28 if I'm not mistaken.
- Turbo Bunny

Back on track, because I can already hear certain JackPointers getting ready to whine about when I'm going to get to the fragging point.

It was apparent that I needed paydata on certain questions because after Chicago, blah blah blah. I was starting to put two and two together. But all I had were theories. I needed solid, actionable paydata.

If nothing else then for my own sanity. Maybe even my soul, what little is left.

First order of business was to learn everything I could about Ares' current state of operations, and I don't mean just what's on the screamsheets. Doesn't take a genius to realize how far this could go, and that paydata is gonna be locked up tight. And after Chicago, my Ares Johnsons were going to be watching me with keen interest to determine if I was still an asset or another threat to be eliminated. To get what I needed, even going to my usual cadre of Ares sources would be risky.

Even what I had from Bob, the HR slag who got me on this ghost-forsaken path, wasn't enough. I needed context, otherwise his data was nothing but a bunch of worthless numbers, too. But more importantly, I needed room to maneuver. I also knew that I would eventually need a way to contact Ravenheart, or at least get her attention without Ares knowing. And maybe it was the hangover, maybe it was the lack of sleep combined with a possible concussion, but a thought occurred to me. It was pure insanity—a potential bloodbath waiting to blow up in my face, maybe getting me and a whole lot of other people killed.

<Laughter detected>

But then—what was that old cliché?—it was so crazy it just might wo... *<audio error, 0.9 MP of data corrupted>*

- That's annoying. And let me guess, no way to recover the corrupt data?
- Danger Sensei

- Negative. The corruption was in the original recording, so there's nothing to recover. The transcription program is filling in the blanks best it can. And because it's constant in all of the files, likely Sticks never knew it was there. Yeah, it's as dumb as it sounds, but I didn't make the damn things.
- Glitch

- I've been working on the files Sticks originally sent us. Using the algorithm that I used to sniff out the Project: Pyro data, I've been able to determine that Ares has at least *three other* similar projects in the works. But like what Sticks said, without context, I can't determine much else, except that the encryption is some of the toughest I've ever seen.
- Netcat

- How the frag did we miss that?
- Slamm-0!

- It's like someone wants to keep their secrets, secret.
- OrkCE0

- The light that pierces the darkness also creates the deeper shadows.
- Man-of-Many-Names

...lled my main Ares Johnson back, the one who originally sent me to Chicago. Said I was ready to go back to work, but under two conditions. One, I wanted payback for what happened to me in Chi-town and played it up like I was royally slotted, that I wanted to "remove those fraggers who tortured and almost killed me from the face of the Earth." Amazing how simply re-focusing and channeling one's anger and desperation helps sell a con. But

then, bounties aren't caught by force and good looks alone. And two, I only wanted dead bounties, no more of this "or alive" drek. Mr. Johnson simply smiled. He never smiled before, not like that. I figured at that point I was either going to get a lot of work, or I was a dead man walking.

I must have sold it proper, because five seconds later a data packet was sent to my 'link with a rather extensive kill-list and the number to an encrypted Caribbean bank account containing an advance of one point five million nuyen. This was on top of an additional five-mil payout when the list was completed. And before anyone asks, most of the targets were, in Mr. Johnson's notes, "former Firewatch operatives and known associates who have now gone rogue and pose a serious threat." The realization that most of those "known associates" were the targets' families and friends made my stomach turn more than the rotgut from drekfast and frankly slotted me off. This also told me that Ares wanted this matter dealt with posthaste and were willing to put some serious weight behind it.

- Sticks wasn't the only one contacted. Ares Johnsons have quietly contacted several top-tier assassins (myself included) directly about multiple "high-value and open-ended" contracts. I know of at least six very proficient individuals who accepted. And for the record, I declined. Not only does it go against several professional standards I hold, but something about this whole affair seems a bit too messy for my tastes.
- Balladeer

- I'm just gonna say it: Sticks is a grade-A hypocrite. He's trying to set himself up as a sympathetic or reluctant hero who's had a crisis of conscience. He's all up in arms about the poor, screwed-over Firewatch and making them out to be big fragging heroes, but what about all the misery he's caused, all the other families he's destroyed? So because

they weren't contributing to the cause of killing bugs, they're expendable? Sorry, Sticks, wherever you are, you can go frag yourself sideways.

- Pistons

- Sticks' moral compass and current motivations aside, it doesn't change the fact that he's been putting out solid paydata that's relevant to everyone here. And speaking of ...
- Bull

- What that news story fails to mention that the shooter, Sergeant Dale Watkins—a ten-year Firewatch vet—was actually ambushed by said drones. According to some sec-cam footage I "found," by the time the KE arrived, Watkins was dead and four out of the five drones sent after him had been destroyed, with the last barely operational. He could have gotten clear, but Watkins instead chose to shield a family from a spray of APDS. All KE did was clean and cover everything up for good press. Anyone want to lay bets it was one of the professionals Balladeer mentioned?
- Bull

- That attack methodology is consistent with one of the six individuals I alluded to earlier. Anyone who wants to follow that lead, PM me. However, the risk of slotting this individual off will require *significant* compensation before any data is transferred.
- Balladeer

- Better question: What was a veteran Firewatch operator doing at a mall in the first place? Seems kind of an odd and frankly risky move to me.
- DangerSensei

- Watkins was noble but stupid. Firewatch is now weaker because he lost track of the bigger picture. He was more valuable to his unit's survival alive then as a dead "hero." No wonder they're dropping like flies if this reflects their tactical and strategic acumen.
- Rigger X

- Sometimes, when we realize our time has come and we cannot stop it, we choose to try for one last act of honor. Not that you'd understand.
- Picador

- I did some quick research and was able to re-trace Watkins' movements before he entered the mall. Seems he came straight from a local strip club called Platinum Trollgirls in Detroit. Wow, seems rather close to the heart of the beast if you ask me. What was so important to risk going there?
- /dev/grrl

KNIGHT ERRANT KILLS TERRORIST IN ANN ARBOR MALL

BY HOLLY GREENFIELD
DETROIT FREE PRESS (AN ARES GLOBAL ENTERTAINMENT COMPANY AFFILIATE)

Chaos erupted at the Briarwood-Sands Mall and Shopping Complex when Knight Errant Security officers responded to an active shooting situation earlier today. According to Knight Errant officials, at approximately 0945 local time, an unstable ork in his mid-thirties entered the mall accompanied by several aerial drones modified with high-powered automatic weapons and began a shooting spree. Several citizens, including small children, were caught in the crossfire before heroic Knight Errant officers could contain and then neutralize the threat. Knight Errant officials have so far refused to name the shooter but have commented that the subject was linked to a known terrorist group. The investigation is ongoing.

- At least he got one last lap dance. But why does that place sound familiar?
- Slamm-0!

- Because I do not think Sgt. Watkins was at Platinum for the scenery—he was more likely there to make some new friends.
- Red Anya

So, with my new contract in place, I got to work. Yeah ...

I knew from the start my plan was going to be interesting. How hard could it be to track down highly trained paramilitary operators who've gone to ground, convince them I'm not trying to kill them while making it *look* like I *am* trying to kill them to the people who hired me, and fake their deaths in order to convince the people who want them dead that they are in fact dead, all while not getting my own head blown off or suffering some other horrible fate in the process? Hard place, meet rock.

But that'll have to wait—my ride is over. More later. End recording.

<OPEN AUDIO FILE TRANSCRIPT: #0313-03-A>

Begin recording.

Well, another day, another secret undisclosed doss. I'm gonna run out of them a lot sooner than later at this pace. Ghost I'm tired. Better start

getting to the meat of this then before some other null-brain gets lucky. So much fighting, so much running. I need something to drink.

<19.7 second pause>

That's better.

After I made my little deal with the devil, I didn't waste any time in collecting data on my would-be prey. Using my new status as a cover for digging into what I was really looking for, I hit up my usual Ares contacts for whatever they could give me on Firewatch, including bios, histories, fitness reports, and even their current psych evaluations. That alone raised a few red flags, because normally I'd usually have to haggle, do a little negotiating for that kind of paydata because it was pretty difficult for them to get and even more risky to disseminate. But this time they were more than willing to give it to me for almost nothing. Now, if I'd told my Ares Mr. Johnsons to slot off and die, *then* tried to hit up my Ares contacts, would I still have gotten the same enthusiastic response from them? Either way, it was a big red flag.

- Sounds like Sticks' confidential contacts stopped being confidential, if they ever truly were in the first place.
- Thorn

- Are *any* of ours? Most of the time, we are simply pawns in another's game.
- Fianchetto

Apparently, despite the generous advance, Mr. Johnson didn't quite trust me. And here I thought we'd bonded. Definitely put a bit of a crimp in my plans. But then, who said finding Ares' dirtiest dirt would be easy? Yeah, my so-crazy-it-just-might-work plan was biting me square in the hoop and I suddenly found myself in a very tight corner. I knew I needed a work-around and needed one fast, because for all Mr. Johnson knew, I was still on their payroll. And I doubted they would be patient about it.

At that point, the only thing left to do was to get to it. So I picked my first target and got to work ... damn, something's not right here ... wait ... is that blood?

Ahhhh frrraaa...

<1,800.0 second pause, file recording auto-termination engaged, auto-save protocol engaged>

- Spoiler alert: There are more files.
- Glitch

<OPEN AUDIO FILE TRANSCRIPT: #0313-03-B>

Begin recording ... again ...

Pro tip: Alcohol really *does* have a blood-thinning effect. Part two of that, make sure you use enough suture-gel with your trauma patches. But enough on that.

Okay, so there was the matter of me having to start hunting down Firewatch members and/or dependents because I thought it was a great way to link up with them. Brilliant, I know. So I won't bore you with the details of my extensive preparation and setup for the first outing. What I will mention is the rather intense feeling of déjà vu when, just as I got into position to make my move, things went dark, and I woke up with a bag over my head.

Again.

Normally I'd be embarrassed at this particular turn of events, but believe it or not, this was actually part of my plan. I was counting on someone intercepting me, or at least confronting me. It also confirmed that someone was watching me. And I wish I could say that when the bag came off, I was surprised to see Colonel Anne Ravenheart herself staring me down with a look that could bore though a panzer. No, what surprised me was the slick-looking elf in a business suit that cost more than most runners make in a year. But he wasn't a suit. The way he moved, the way he looked at me, like a predator trying to determine the best way to eat their prey, told me all I needed to know at that moment. My guess was spook of some kind. At least we were in a well-lit if sparse room. Although the plastic covering the floor didn't inspire confidence.

I expected Ravenheart to speak, but she was too busy giving me the murder-eyes. And let me tell you, I'd rather face a hive with just a sick than take her on. So I got to listen to Mr. Elf-Spook talk. At first it was the stand ... *<audio error, 1.9 MP of data corrupted>* ... he at least knew how to hit. He asked me again what I was doing, so I repeated what I had already said, what I was *really* doing there. Then another blow, more of my blood went flying. How he managed to keep his white shirt clean was ... *<audio error, 3.3 MP of data corrupted>* ... mind felt like it was on fire, but frag that witch! She wanted to see in my mind, fine, I stopped resisting, gave her the full sho ... *<audio error, 2.7 MP of data corrupted>*

And then she actually balked. We stood there, or rather she stood—I was still strapped to the chair, after all—staring each other in the eyes. A few heartbeats later, she told Rex to free me. He seemed dubious, but he shrugged. I spit more blood on the floor. We were pretty much best chummers at that point.

Yay friendship.

With all that out of the way and everyone on the same side, it was time to go to work. Over the next few weeks, my target list started to dwindle at a very rapid pace. I started with the dependents, making sure they were out of the line of fire first, then went on to doing the same for shooters. Amazing how much easier it is to make that happen when the targets are willing participants. Some of it was theatrical, some of it rather gruesome, but as far as Ares was considered, the loose ends were permanently dead ... err, tied up.

But I got word that I wasn't the only one looking for them. Ares hedged their bets and called in several assassins. And we had similar lists. A lot were saved, gotten to safety. But not all of them. In my career, what used to bother me were the bounties that got away. Now, it was the ones I couldn't save. And it feels worse.

<58 second pause, no background noise detected>

Rex also became my designated go-between with Ravenheart. At that point, it was decided that any further direct contact with Firewatch members, other than to fake their own deaths, would be too risky. I didn't let on, and despite the nice job done on the facial re-construct, I knew exactly who, or should I say exactly *what* Rex Simmons was. Didn't make me feel any better because I had to wonder what his or rather their angle was in all this. Apparently, they had a dog in this fight as well. Ravenheart may trust him, at least in an "enemy-of-my-enemy" sort of way, but I didn't. I had no real way of knowing if any subsequent instructions came from Ravenheart, or some fallen angel. Oh well, just one more thing to watch my back over. Not like I'm not used to it.

And on that note, this is a good as any spot to break. End recording.

- Rex Simmons? This just got even more interesting.
- Thorn

- Care to share with the rest of the class, mate? We do come here for paydata, after all.
- Chainmaker

- Allow me. Most know him as an independent runner out of Seattle. A select few know him as one of the Seriphim's finest who was, for all intents and purposes, drafted into indentured servitude when Cross Applied Technologies was all but absorbed by Ares. Rumors persist that their loyalties still lay with CATCo and still unfulfilled secret objectives.
- Fianchetto

- It's also an open secret that Knight liked to make the Seriphim's life a living hell.
- Thorn

- Bloody hell ...
- Chainmaker

- That's scary, but back to the topic at hand. Do we have any data confirming the life/death status of Firewatch members or their dependents at this point?
- Butch

- Having cross-referenced the current murders or disappearances with known Ares employees, there has been one hell of an uptick in recent weeks, which would be consistent with what Sticks has said. And given the gruesome nature of some of the killings, I hope they were elaborate hoaxes. I lost my lunch looking at some of the crime scene holo-pics.
- Sunshine

- I've been keeping tabs as well. With my personal knowledge, at least eight of the current incidents are real.
- Balladeer

- There's been a lot of chatter on the Outpost concerning this, mainly scuttlebutt among Ares' recent merc hires, myself included. From what I've determined, at least sixteen additional Firewatch members have been eliminated since the *Cutting Aces* posting, and these don't include those Sticks apparently assisted. No word on any additional dependents. Not to change the subject, but something else has come up in regard to Ares that also concerns me. Recently, at least two regiments worth of Ares Arms military personnel and various security units within KE have been re-deployed to areas in and around Detroit, southern Michigan, and northwest Ohio. Hell, even units from Hard Corps and Wolverine Security have been included. This has left a lot of locations of strategic and political importance to be staffed by mercenaries. Additionally, I can neither confirm nor deny that several private military contractors have been given supplemental orders to have a "ready reaction and response force" on standby until further notice. No additional information or orders were given.
- Picador

- You mean this?
- 2XL

ARES ARMS BEGINS UPGRADE PROGRAM

BY LEW STEINBUSH
NEWSPULSE LIVE!

Thank you for tuning into NEWSPULSE LIVE!, your up-to-the-nanosecond news coverage for people on the go! I'm your on-the-spot reporter, Lew Steinbush. As you can see behind me, the I-75 corridor just past the Ohio-Michigan line looks like something out of a war sim as vehicles carrying troops, weapons, and equipment make their way to temporary staging areas and bases throughout southern Michigan. But this isn't an invasion; rather, it's in preparation for a massive, corporate-wide upgrade program of all military and paramilitary assets. According to corporate spokesman Brigadier General Lloyd Ritter, this marks the beginning of a two-month rotation of new equipment into various Ares' military units followed by a six-month training-and-shakedown tour. After which, all units will eventually be redeployed to their previous duty stations. When asked why the corporation is conducting the refit in such a manor, General Ritter replied, "Why not? There're no major world crises at the moment, and we have the necessary material ready to go literally right now. Might as well get it done now and as smoothly as possible, before the next flashpoint pops up."

- I smell some serious bulldrek. It goes against all standard military practice and theory to try to upgrade the entirety of your military forces *all at once*. Even with mercs filling in, this move is monumentally stupid.
- Hard Exit

- With everything that's happening in Chicago of late, is there a chance this could be a staging for operations there?
- X-Prime

- Maybe. Relations between Ares and DeeCee are still as frosty as ever given how Ares turned their back (again) on the UCAS when Denver went frag-up and KE barely lifted a finger to help. Didn't help when Ares gave the merest token of objections and official protests. But given the lack of Ares presence—at least visibly—in Chicago at the moment, I guess it's plausible.
- Sunshine

- It could also imply that they know something is up and are getting ready.
- Treadle

- Okay, bit of an announcement. Several of the files received were so corrupted, I'm not even going to try to post them here. But I did give them to Fred and Bull to munch on. I wouldn't put it past Sticks to have employed some fancy encryption or had data embedded in the fragged-up code. Want them, hit me up in PM and have at it. I have other things that need tending to.
- Glitch

- On it.
- Icarus

- Already there, send me a PM, we'll coordinate.
- Netcat

- I hate to agree, at least in principle, with what Rigger X has been saying from the beginning about these files. All the "corrupted data" and now entire missing files? It does seem rather convenient. Are we sure no one's playing us here?
- Mika

- Are we ever?
- Glitch

<OPEN AUDIO FILE TRANSCRIPT: #0313-16-A>

Begin recording.

And this brings us to what's basically the end. And what a glorious cluster-frag of an end.

We thought we had everything set, all the angles covered. I should have known better, I should have listened to everyone. But no, I knew better. I knew what it was like, I knew what it was like to have the bug literally under your skin, literally invading your mind. Maybe I lost my cool, maybe I let all of this become too damn personal. But frag it, we wouldn't have gotten this far without me.

I was the one who chased down the leads. I was the one who acted as the eyes and ears within Ares. I was the one who put my reputation, my *life* on the line. I was the one who got within three meters of Otto Hendricks ... and let him go for "the greater good." All of those who'd suffered, who were victims of Pyro and Night Visitor. All those Hendricks essentially killed for the UB, and then later for Ares.

- Wait, Night Visitor? Is anyone else thinking?
- Icarus

- Yep. Sending you data now.
- Netcat

I should have ended it right there, gotten my revenge. Or justice. Whichever. But Ravenheart convinced me otherwise. Should have ignored her. What would she know of the pain, the fear? She tried to keep me out, but I wouldn't have it. Once I learned about the beta-merges, the victims of Hendricks' little scheme, what he was really planning, what Knight had *no clue* about, and Ravenheart was going to *shut me out*?

I did something no one else had ever been able to do—force her to change her mind. Bet she never saw that one coming. But then, when you help save several families, people tend to be grateful. I listened to her once, and a madman had gotten away. Not again, *never again*.

Why didn't they let me kill him? It would have saved the run ... it would have saved everyone there! But no, we had to leave them. After everything I did, after everything I sacrificed, we ... just ... left them.

Everything had gone like clockwork in the beginning. We found the lab where Pyro was being conducted. We made entry, wasted anyone who got in our way. Then, we found *them*. It was supposed to be a data-retrieval, maybe a small bit of rescue. But we weren't ready for the sheer amount of ... *there were too many*!

But we still could have pulled it off, still could have gotten the job done. Except we ran into Hendricks.

I knew he was powerful, but I had no idea. The spirits he had at his command, combined with the Alphas. Gods, it was all even Ravenheart could do to just stand toe-to-toe with Hendricks. A quarter of our force was wiped out in the first sixty seconds, even with our firepower and skills. How can we fight them now?

If I had just been able to kill him before!

So we did the only thing we could do: run. We tried to take some of the victims with us, to show the world what Ares, what Knight *allowed to happen*!

Why can't I get the images out of my head? Why do I keep seeing those, what were they, merge chambers? All the ... all the ... blood and gore, the failed ones, just discarded like meat! And why do

I keep hearing the cries of those in the pens? *Why won't it stop*?!

And why can't I stop seeing Ellis' face ... She went back, closed the door behind us, let us ...

AAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRR!!!!!!

<62.6 second pause, no background noise detected>

- Anyone else think that Sticks has officially lost it?
- Stone

We should have saved them, we should have saved her. But she wouldn't leave.

And worse, we've tipped our hand. We had the numbers, we had the element of surprise, we had the *initiative*. Now, Ares knows we're out there, scattered but still out there. They know what I did, know I betrayed them. My accounts, my safehouses, everything I've worked for is gone. None of my contacts are returning my calls, they know I'm damaged goods and in the irony of ironies, I have a bounty on *my* head! No more backup, no one watching my six. All I have left is this final safehouse, about fifteen thousand in various currencies, a few weapons, including my tonfa, and assorted bits of gear that together could barely fill a duffel bag.

I honestly don't know what I'm going to do now. I'm a wanted man, with a large bounty on my head. I've been, for all intents and purposes, disavowed by my former Firewatch allies. And the way I figure it, it's only a matter of time before someone, or some*thing*, punches my ticket. I just hope that whoever has listened to my ramblings can make some good of them. I think my little chapter in this story is done.

Still, I did everything I could. Maybe I'll just go find Hendricks anyway. I know I can. I can find anyone. And I'll just go ahead and kill him. No one to stop me anymore.

No one to stop me.

End recording.

- And let me guess, no one has heard from Sticks?
- Beaker

- Before I posted all of this, I pinged just about every means of communication I have with him and got zip. Guess we'll just have to wait and see. I've already secured his JackPoint connections and have him officially listed as "inactive."
- Glitch

- He's also not lying about having a price on his head. Last check showed a cool 75K. Good news, if you can call it that, is that the bounty is listed as "alive only." Guess Ares wants to have a little chat with him before they kill him.
- Balladeer

- Think I'd rather be dead.
- Clockwork

- Maybe, but I know some people around Detroit. There're rumors of someone matching Sticks' description bumming around the darker shadows there. I dropped them some cred and told them to send a message if they find anything concrete.
- Danger Sensei

- Other than the concluded ramblings, has anyone come up with any concrete data from all this?
- Bull

- Icarus and I have been scouring the corrupted data files. Glitch was on to something. There was a modified copy/edit file program screwing with the code enough to make it appear corrupted. With the help of my best sprite and Icarus' custom decrypt software, we pulled some bits and phrases, but it was like reading a story starting on page thirteen, no context. We found references to some of the mystery projects that Sticks alluded to. Besides Pyro, Project: Night Visitor was something that Hendricks was personally running. We think it was Hendricks' recruitment efforts for Pyro that occurred from both inside and outside Ares.
- Netcat

- The other one we got was something called Project: Bottleneck. The program is still chewing on it, so we've got nothing on what it may be, but we discovered that whatever it entails it's likely happening in several different cities, including DeeCee, Chicago, Denver, and Detroit. But what really got my attention was something that was so heavily encrypted that it almost wrecked my algorithms while working on one particular file. And even then I only got the word "gambit."
- Icarus

- On another note, I may or may not have gotten an alert about "possible terrorists attacking key Ares facilities," saying that all contracted employees and affiliated units are on a heightened state of alert. Got this about the same time a classified facility was compromised. Wonder if that was Firewatch's work?
- Picador

- Hey guys, not to spoil the party, but got some breaking news. Everyone is going to want to read this.
- Sunshine

- Oh, frag with a rotten cherry on top.
- X-Prime

- The test of wills begins.
- Man-of-Many-Names

NEW BUG BREEDS

- You know what I hate? Bugs. I hate them. I don't like their shells, or their legs, or their wings, or their swarms, or anything about them. Nothing. Not one thing. So the fact that there are bug spirits out there? Well, it doesn't surprise me that they are out to fuck us. At least, that's what I'm being told. So here's your chance to share my nightmares and get a look at what might be found in the heart of all those hidden hives.
- Bull

EXCERPT FROM ARES INTEL REPORT

It may come as no surprise that bug spirits are adapting to our world. They are known for their adaptability, if only because they use human forms as hosts against the withering forces of metaplanar evanescence. But beyond their capacity for assimilation as spiritual invaders, their very nature as insects, whether by way of mimicking the species of Earth or some hitherto unknown influence they exert on our own, means they adapt in far more specific fashions to their environmental situations. Chicken-or-egg arguments aside, the undeniable fact is that a closer examination of host-merged insect spirits show that they are displaying a greater degree of species variation than previously observed.

Again, the complication regarding these new expressions comes from a lack of knowledge regarding the ultimate source. The insects may be mimicking native species to better adapt, or are perhaps influenced without choice toward expressions based on unknown local manascape radiations (see Professor Reinhardt's papers on metagenetic subspecies determinants by geographical patterns). For the moment, it is impossible to say with any surety how these subtypes have developed.

Perhaps the most interesting development is the appearance of breeds that exist to help or hinder others. Until recently, insect spirits each seemed to exist in a kind of vacuum, with the cooperation or competition of any given hive at the discretion of the queen or shaman commanding it. But now it seems there are new breeds or sub-breeds which fulfil an ecological function in conjunction with others. Some prey upon other breeds, much as mantids have before, but now

TERRORISTS TARGET ARES EXECUTIVE BOARD

BY HENRY BLOCK
NEWSPULSE LIVE!

Approximately fifteen minutes ago, explosions ripped through several floors of the Ares Macrotechnology HQ building in downtown Detroit. While the exact numbers have yet to be confirmed, initial estimates have the death toll at fifty-seven, although those employees are being listed as "missing" until their status and identities can be confirmed. That number though is expected to rise despite the valiant efforts of emergency responders and Knight Errant Security.

Among those currently reported as missing are several members of the Ares board of directors, most prominently Arthur Vogel, who is one of the corporation's current major stockholders and had arrived in Detroit only three hours ago after a long and extensive tour of the corporation's holdings worldwide.

Upon learning of the tragic events, current board member and former Ares CEO Damien Knight issued a statement calling the attacks "cowardly" and described them as a "coordinated strike against corporate leadership designed to cripple Ares." He also vowed to use all resources at his—and the corporation's—disposal as well as all of his individual influence to "find and prosecute the perpetrators of this heinous act, within the bounds of corporate and UCAS national law."

The Detroit City Council has also expressed outrage at the attacks and have offered any and all support to Ares and their employees. Spokespersons from Ares, though, have yet to officially accept any aid or respond to the council.

These attacks come only days after Ares Arms began a massive upgrade of all their military, paramilitary, and security forces. It also comes after board member Arthur Vogel called for an emergency meeting after arriving in Detroit to discuss leadership issues within the corporation. When asked about this, Knight said that under Corporate Court law and Ares' company regulations, he will be taking full and complete control of the corporation under emergency powers until a proper investigation can be conducted and new board members are selected.

there are support spirits, whose only function is to provide ancillary power to other bug spirits.

That's how we'll look at them, then—analyzing the subtypes that have been documented to this point.

BUG SPIRIT STATS

The subtypes of spirits listed here are all based on the primary types of insect spirits on p. 98, *Street Grimoire*, with elements that should be added or changed listed in the *Game Information* section of each write-up. Some sample types are included at the end of the chapter.

ANTS

FIRE ANTS

Fire ants are located primarily in the CAS, the Carib League, and large portions of South America. Although traditional fire ants are named for their coloration and the burning sensation of their sting, the bugs have actual pyrotechnic abilities. Their chiton also tends to be an almost chromatic copper to red, and they are more prone to aggressive behavior than most ant spirits. Authorities are particularly interested in keeping them out of civilized areas, due to their fire-starting abilities and uncertain temperament.

- That doesn't make any sense. Why would they produce fire if the original animal doesn't?
- Beaker

- Because they are spirits, and spirit rules sometimes mean following the spirit of the rule.
- Man-of-Many-Names

- What does that mean?
- Beaker

- Belief can shape reality. Reality shapes belief.
- Man-of-Many-Names

- Sorry I asked.
- Beaker

GAME INFORMATION

While most ant spirits secrete formic acid, increasing the damage potential of their attacks, fire ants secrete a chemical that ignites shortly after exposure to air. All damage done by fire ant spirits is considered fire damage instead of the usual acid damage (see **Fire Damage**, p. 171, *SR5*).

CUTTER ANTS

Cutter ants occupy the same basic regions as fire ants, though they are more likely to occupy regions with something to chew on. They may also have certain cosmetic similarities to carpenter ants, though the end result is the same: They are some of the most hazardous merges to civilization. Cutters seem to take pleasure in breaking apart buildings and industrial structures, and have been blamed for the collapse of several Aztechnology hydroelectric dams in Amazonia. While this might make them seem like potential allies for Amazonian resistance fighters and eco-terrorists, there are other colonies of Cutters that focus on deforestation, ravaging vast swaths of jungle greenery.

GAME INFORMATION

Cutter ants are massively destructive to buildings and other engineered structures. Multiply the DV of cutter ants' natural weapons by 2 when attacking barriers or other static structures. This replaces their acid attack.

LOCUSTS

DESERT LOCUSTS

Found primarily in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, desert locusts are known to swarm agricultural outposts and farmlands, though instead of consuming crops, they snatch up the workers. It was initially thought that they sought mass destruction when they destroyed automated and drone systems. Only later was it realized that they purposely wanted cheap metahuman labor to take its place. They find their harvest in the fields, like we do.

When they possess a living being, they tend to stretch out their form, giving them a long, rigid look.

- They're pretty indiscriminate in the bodies they choose and the quality of the merge. They simply want numbers on their side. If you think you might face some of these things, bring something that fires a lot of bullets.
- Cayman

GAME INFORMATION

Desert locusts prefer hot arid environments and avoid cold climates. They have the Immunity (Fire) power and the Vulnerability (Cold) weakness.

MOLE CRICKETS

A solitary hunter, never building hives and willing to devour even other insect spirits, mole crickets are terrifyingly adaptable. Like other locusts, they are capable of flight, but they also possess the ability to swim and burrow rapidly through the ground.

Mole crickets can be found all over the world, but primarily manifest in equatorial regions. Among the most mobile of creatures in the Sixth World, mole crickets are prone to nomadic behavior. Poor merges often become boogeymen, crafting their own burrows or adopting isolated perches and seeking whatever prey pleases them. The nomads may find a Queen in their travels and bring it suitable hosts for investment, but more often they enjoy hunting other insect spirits. Their ability to move through the ground means they can break into a subterranean hive and strike at its weakest point. If they were ever to work in unison as other hives do, they might well eliminate the majority of other insect spirits in the world.

GAME INFORMATION

Mole crickets always possess the Flight and Swimming skills and can move through natural earth with the Swimming skill as if it were water.

TERMITES

SUBTERRANEAN TERMITES

Most termite spirits tend to build towers, as may be noted by the massive hive structures in the Australian Outback. Subterranean termites represent a more pernicious and insidious threat. These termites proceed downward, building their population with a dangerous combination of caution and aggression. More and more numbers are always required for their obsessive expansion projects, and their massive lairs do not require a surfeit of good merges. As a result, many of them are twisted expressions from homeless and animal host stock. Clearing a subterranean termite hive is among the most dangerous of bug hunts, both for the legions of spirits defending it and the many decoy chambers, false passages, and ambush sites. Chicago, in particular, is home to many still-undiscovered termite warrens.

- And I won't be doing any more discovering of them. Those warrens are a nightmare. They are some of the clearest manifestations I've ever seen that bugs have a completely alien thought process. When you walk through one of these things—battling claustrophobia, often not able to stand up straight—your mind keeps trying to impose some sort of order or logic on what they built. Maybe this is a guard chamber, leading to something important. Maybe they put extra traps here because we're near the queen. But none of that is true. You could have a battle royale in a chamber that leads to a dead end. You cannot reconstruct their thinking. All you can do is plunge ahead, listening for distant rustling or for the sounds of termites banging their heads on the tunnel walls, and there is no way you can tell where the sound is coming from because of all the echoes, until suddenly it is on top of you and beneath you and the ground and everything in it is waiting to swallow you and keep you forever.

  It's pure nightmare fuel.
- Hard Exit

GAME INFORMATION

Subterranean termites dig deep into the earth, building labyrinthine hive structures below ground. They all have the Reduced Sense (Blind) weakness, although being dual natured, they are not severely hampered by this blindness. Highly resilient, all subterranean termites gain +2 to Damage Resistance tests.

WASPS

HUNTER WASPS

Hunter wasps represent one of the most dangerous sub-breeds of bugs that prey upon others, not only because of their inherent combat power, but because they have been perceived as a potential ally against other hives. Rumor has it Ares attempted to weaponize them as a self-replicating army, but the hunter wasp is simply too volatile and individualistic to be tamed. If their territory doesn't have any hives to prey upon, they eventually move on to search for more, but they often hunt metahumans before then to ensure their population continues.

- Ares is now dedicated to studying their behavior so they'll know how an environment changes once hunter wasps move in. They bring some chaos with them, and Ares figures if they can't use the wasps directly as weapons, they'll use the chaos.
- Cosmo

GAME INFORMATION

Hunter wasps are a solitary breed, rather than the usual social wasp breed. They are capable of implanting another invested spirit with a larva that will devour and replace the spirit with a new hunter wasp. Treat this Investment as usual (p. 195, *Street Grimoire*) with the exception that it applies to an already Invested vessel.

BEES

Bees are a hive-building breed of wasp that can generate a mana-rich Awakened food somewhat resembling honey. The use of this substance is currently unknown, and samples are highly prized for research purposes.

Bee spirits are less aggressive than most other insect varieties, tending to their harvests and maintaining an odd equilibrium with the local ecosystem, which includes nearby metahuman populations. Highly communal, they prize a good merge and are known to send envoys to speak on their behalf to ask for peace and protection. They offer their honey and spiritual strength, and promise they will only take volunteers for investment. The odd beauty of their hives and the harmony of their hive mind song makes this a strangely alluring prospect, and the thought of health, longevity, and restored vigor means the elderly and sick sometimes agree to the process. Their families are cared for, both physically by the bees and financially with the sale of the honey.

It should be noted that while the bees are social with humans, they prefer to work with small groups, and never with megacorporations. It may be that they prefer to maintain the upper hand, or that they simply do not trust groups that are larger or stronger than the hive. Also, while bee spirits are almost never aggressive, they are suicidally committed to defense, throwing themselves at the enemy with wild abandon and selfless attacks with no thought of their own safety.

- This description sounds too good to be true—I mean, come on, cuddly insect spirits? But they really seem to be as advertised, mainly interested in keeping to themselves. Their defensive commitment is no joke, though, and hiding important goods in a bee hive is a growing trend. Sending the unwary to retrieve those goods is also a growing trend for disposing of the incautious.
- Nephrine

BEETLE

GOLIATH

Goliath flesh forms are terrifying armored beasts. They commonly invest large hosts to begin with, favoring orks and trolls, but any physically hardy specimen is an attractive proposition to them. More alarmingly, they have no problem with investing paracritters, especially larger ones.

Unlike most insect spirits, Goliaths have a high protein requirement, meaning they are likely to prey upon animals and metahumans just for their flesh. This makes them more aggressive hunters, consequently making it harder for them to remain incognito as other hives try to. Their rare good merges become massive with muscle, and they often use their influence to ship large potential hosts back to their hives. As a result, they often have host bodies from distant places, even other continents.

While Goliaths appear most frequently in Africa, isolated incidents have seen them in locations all over the world, almost always leaving a trail of devastation in their wake.

GAME INFORMATION

Goliath beetles are intimidatingly massive samples of their breed. Regardless of form, they gain a +4 to Damage Resistance Tests.

WATER

Water beetles can be found all over the world, but most notably are the only known insect breed to build underwater nests. Those who feel safe in aquacologies have learned to fear the intrusion of water beetles, who have been known to lair in lower storage areas.

Like their earthly insect kin, water beetles can be unpredictable in their diet. Most commonly, they seem to be scavengers, eating whatever nutrition finds its way to their selected lair. A few are predators, which has led to some aquacologies increasing the weapons loadout of those venturing into possible lairs.

GAME INFORMATION

Water beetles are an aquatic version of the species. They possess the Swimming skill and can remain submerged indefinitely.

- No shit. The Proteus aquacology off the coast of Australia had to be scrapped. Turns out the bugs got settled in while it was still being built, and they eventually took the whole place over. One big hive, every man woman and child bugged out.
- Plan 9

- Before Snopes casts doubt, I can confirm this. I know one of the pilots who inserted the team to clean it out. Their last transmissions stated they were pinned down. They told the sub to get clear, then detonated the auxiliary hydrogen cells. Half the place went up, the pressure imploded the rest. Proteus depth charged the rest. All of it was horrible.
- Sounder

CENTIPEDES

A newly discovered bug spirit, centipedes are a solitary breed. They are immediately recognizable by their long bodies with anywhere from a dozen to over a hundred pairs of legs. They are primarily carnivorous but prefer prey much smaller than themselves, so metahumans are rarely viewed as a food source unless the individual centipede spirit is especially powerful.

GAME INFORMATION

Unique Qualities: All centipede spirits have the Movement power, which is only able to be used on themselves.

HOUSE CENTIPEDE "THOUSAND-LEGGERS"

Surprisingly, thousand-leggers are one of the rare symbiotic bug breeds. As terrifying as they are, they enjoy hunting dangerous vermin, which means they sometimes act as a vigilante pest service for down-and-outers. Their attitude regarding metahumans can inspire a live-and-let-live attitude with the locals, so long as they don't start snatching people up for infestation. A smart house centipede can develop a network of human supporters who may not trust them but can at least be friendly.

GAME INFORMATION

"Thousand-legger" centipedes are so called due to their extremely high number of long, spindly legs. Preferring urban environments with significant decay, they are just another reason barrens

areas are such a delightful place to live. They possess the Climbing skill and the Wall Walking power (p. 194, *Howling Shadows*).

- That sounds like a deal with the devil.
- Hard Exit

- A deal with the devil, or deal with the devil rats. If you've ever slept in a barrens squat, you can only imagine the sense of security you could get from the monster under the bed being on your side for once.
- Gillette

- Plus, these guys are expert roach killers. They see a roach spirit, they make killing it their new mission in life. It's horrifying to watch, but kind of a thing of beauty.
- Red

- The scary part is growing up looking up to the monster. Makes you more likely to be a willing investiture.
- Lyran

TROPICAL CENTIPEDE

Tropical centipedes are dangerous predators, particularly in Amazonia. Perhaps operating using residual memories from their hosts, they engage in hit-and-run tactics, darting in quick to deliver a toxic slash before retreating or moving to another target. They close in for the kill when their target is reeling and weakened. They often poison potential hosts to make it easier to drag them back to the nest.

GAME INFORMATION

Preferring the cover of tropical rainforests and avoiding civilization, these spirits are rarely encountered. They possess the Venom power in all forms.

- These things don't even care about trying to integrate with metahumans. Amazonian rebels tried to approach them about fighting Aztlan, but they were never heard from again. I thought it was a bad idea, but they needed every asset against the Aztechnology war machine. Blood Panther special ops had them scared. After that, known centipede territories were used to herd in AZT troops in the hopes they might fall victim. If you ask me, we should have burned them out. Who knows how deep they've dig in since.
- Picador

CICADAS

CENTURY

While solitary and not known to act aggressively individually, the century cicada could become a large threat if allowed to grow unchallenged. The breeding pattern of this spirit seems to be that queens invest hosts and then command them to enter dormancy in hiding. Their true numbers are not known, but if a queen amassed a sizable force over time and then commanded them to all become active at once, the effects could be devastating. Some method of detecting where their dormant forms are is being worked on by more than one megacorporate research department.

GAME INFORMATION

Century cicadas possess the Induced Dormancy (Queen's command) weakness.

- Firewatch teams uncovered one of these in Wisconsin years ago and have been hunting them down since. Deep sonar and geological scans have turned up a few, but they're terrified they've missed one. They cover the whole area with containment domes and claim chemical spills or quarantines, then sneak in and bomb it. If one of these goes critical, they are estimated to hit with the power of a weapon of mass destruction. If the containment of a torpid nest results in premature swarm, they Thor shot it. Ares isn't taking chances, and I don't blame them.
- Red

- That's some expensive, highly damaging actions Ares is taking. Makes me worried about how worried they are.
- Cosmo

PRIMAL SPIDERS

Often mistakenly associated with the Spider totem, primal spiders are a different beast entirely. They are solitary, manipulative, and highly secretive.

GAME INFORMATION

All primal spiders possess the Binding power (p. 394, *SR5*). This power takes the form of webbing and has a LOS range.

- Okay, wait, wait, I know a couple of Spider shamans, and they aren't insects by a long shot. How does this even work?
- Lyran

- Have you ever noticed that Spider shamans are really defensive about *not* being bug shamans? I mean, on top of their usual caginess? Maybe they've got something to hide ...
- Haze

- Can I bring someone in to talk about this?
- Winterhawk

- TEMPORARY ACCESS GRANTED USER: TWIST

- I had hoped my sins had died with my sister.

  Forgive me if I ramble, this is difficult for me.

  Almost thirty years ago, I was seeking a cure for my sister. She had contracted HMHVV and become a wendigo. My quest took me to an ancient temple in the Australian outback. I thought I had found artifacts that would give me the power to cure her, but I unwittingly released... something. Something ancient. Evil.

  It took all my power and cost the lives of many friends, as well as my sister, to stop what came out. If we had not succeeded, the world would have been consumed in nuclear fire and dark magic.

  The reason I bring this up is because the entity, which called itself "Grandmother," was very much like a spider. Its avatar could touch metahumans and ... it was like investment. They became twisted half-spider creatures, like spider flesh forms.

  As far as I know, Grandmother was destroyed. But recently, I've heard tell from Spider shamans that they sometimes hear a whisper, as though their totem is talking to them, but its voice is different. The impulses and invitations have a different tone, a different intention.

  My magic is gone now, but I remember what it felt like to hear Dog. And I know enough now about toxic shamans to know what a corrupted totem sounds like. This is similar, but it's ... too much like an insect beckoning.

  What if Grandmother wasn't destroyed? What if she was only weakened? And it took all these years, and all these strange events, to bring her back to power? What if she's been spinning her web ever since, and now she's back?
- Twist

- Can we speak privately about your theories on a cure?
- Doc Fangs

- CC me on that, please.
- Red

- Stay focused, gentlemen.

  I've put out some feelers, and it sounds like a few Spiders have said the same. Others have been reported missing. Rumor is Anasi followers aren't as troubled, but the jury is still out.

  I'm going to look into this. I suggest we all keep our ears open and coordinate on what we find. This bears watching.
- Winterhawk

- Can you tell us more about the temple, Twist? Or how you defeated her the first time?
- Elijah

- I'm sorry. I can't.
- Twist

TRAPDOOR

These spirits are solitary and gifted at camouflage. They can live in a broad range of habitats, only truly disliking extreme cold, and wherever they are, they make a small container out of surrounding materials and then hide in it, giving themselves shelter and protection, while also providing a staging ground where they can leap out at their prey.

As the preceding sentence indicates, trapdoor spider spirits are predators. Since they are large enough to capture human-sized prey (or even a troll if they're feeling ambitious), they don't have to feed all that often. This has led some to feel quite comfortable in barrens areas, where they can pick off the occasional victim who no one will notice is gone.

GAME INFORMATION

The trapdoor spider can use its Binding power to create traps. These traps cover one meter and the spider can maintain a number of traps equal to its Force. Creatures or metahumans entering the range of these traps trigger the effect. Until sprung, these traps are undetectable except with an Assensing (3) Test.

BLACK WIDOW

The mere mention of the existence of black widow spirits is enough to send a shudder down any listener's back, but there is a good chance that at least a portion of the trepidation is not deserved. Yes, these spirits are venomous, and some of them are hunters. The popular image, though, of them gliding through the night and leaving a swath of death in their wake is exaggerated. When they hunt, they hunt for food; otherwise,

they often prefer to be left alone. They will avoid conflict when possible, even to the point of playing dead to make an unwelcome intruder leave. They are perhaps best thought of as a hermit in a distant cabin, as what they want more than anything is to be left alone to live as they need to.

GAME INFORMATION

The black widow spider has the Wall Walking power (p. 194, *Howling Shadows*) and Venom power (p. 401, *SR5*) in all forms.

FIREFLY

BURSTER

The so-called burster firefly is not derivative of any known natural or paranatural firefly species native to Earth, so it is possible that they are an evolutionary adaptation, using a more aggressive form of their natural phosphorescent emissions. The bright flash that they can emit is a defense mechanism, giving them the time they need to flee. They are not natural fighters, so flight is far more preferred than combat.

GAME INFORMATION

Burster fireflies can rapidly increase the level of brightness of their glow in a blinding flash. They possess the Innate Spell (Mass Sight Removal) power.

- Want a scarier possibility? What if it's something they adapted from another type of spirit they conquered in some other metaplane?
- Ethernaut

- That doesn't seem likely. We've never seen alien expressions of invested spirits, before. I mean, have we?
- Glitch

- There are worlds beyond ours that have not fared so well as we. The hands of the invae or others have changed them and inflicted damage. They cannot be saved, and their spoils serve their invaders. They can serve us now only as cautionary tales.
- Man-of-Many-Names

- I hate when he says that much at once. It's never a good thing.
- Slamm-0!

FLIES

BOTFLIES

The botfly is a particularly nasty breed, having a delay after Inhabitation before the vessel is truly consumed. A vessel can walk around for weeks or even months before the spiritual larvae completes its incubation and fully inhabits the hapless victim. The process can become quite grotesque. The exact stages of it are not known, as no one undergoing this prolonged inhabitation has ever been observed by detailed medical equipment, so we cannot know what is happening inside the victim in this time. We know that they experience considerable pain as significant portions of their insides are liquidated. The appetite drops, though the strength of the spirit inside keeps the host from faltering. When the spirit finally fully emerges, there is often a kind of bursting, involving the expulsion of pus and other bodily fluids and terrific pain in the victim's last moments. At the very least this means that scenes of recent botfly emergence are fairly easy to notice.

GAME INFORMATION

During the botfly's incubation time, the pending Inhabitation can be detected through an Assensing (4) Test. For each week the larvae incubates within the vessel (in excess of the usual days equal to the spirit's Force required by Inhabitation), the spirit receives a +1 dice pool modifier towards the Opposed Test of its Force x 2 against the vessel's Willpower + Intuition. The vessel only needs to remain within the magical lodge for the initial days equal to the spirit's Force. The Inhabitation otherwise functions as usual (p. 195, *Street Grimoire*). If the spirit is detected during this incubation period, it is vulnerable to Banishing. With any Banishing attempts, the vessel takes Physical damage resisted with Willpower alone equal to the hits the spirit achieves against the Banishing, whether it is successful or not.

- Ew.
- EB

DRAGONFLIES

Dragonflies are quite different than the usual fly insect spirit. Their preferred habitat is near large bodies of fresh water. The most significant problem with dragonfly spirits is their high appetite.

They may eat more than ten kilos worth of food per day, so they make their presence felt in the area where they settle. Fortunately, they can be territorial, which means they do not often work in packs. If they did, they could well strip a farm if they decided to live there.

GAME INFORMATION

They lack the Pestilence power of most fly spirits. They possess the Dive Attack power (p. 190, *Howling Shadows*) and the Movement power (p. 399, *SR5*) in all forms.

- Dragonflies make big targets, but they move fast and love to barrel down on targets and drag them away. Scary as hell.
- Red

MANTIDS

MIMIC MANTIS

Mimic mantises hunt through guile rather than stealth. They infiltrate the hives of other insect spirits and prey upon their members. As might be guessed, the enemies of insect spirits, especially Ares, are very interested in figuring out how to point these spirits at their enemies. Mantid spirits, though, are notoriously ill-tempered, which means that working out any sort of partnership is not going to be easy. Ares might have more luck figuring out how to point them in their preferred direction, using them as unwitting accomplices rather than true allies.

GAME INFORMATION

Mimic mantises possess the Aura Masking power (p. 194, *Street Grimoire*) in all forms and always have the Impersonation skill.

- TEMPORARY ACCESS GRANTED USER: PRAXIS

- So who is this, Red?
- Slamm-0

- A mimic mantis.
- Red

- What the hell?!
- Pistons

- I knew it!
- Clockwork

- I just thought she could give us an insider perspective. Glitch agreed.
- Red

- So I'm blocking responses to her. Just shut up and take this for whatever it is, bulldrek or straight data.
- Glitch

- I hope you know what you're doing. Both of you.
- Bull

- POST FILTER: ON

- Such a warm welcome! Hello, everyone. I just wanted to take this opportunity to tell you that we are quite willing to help you against other invae. We take exceptional pleasure in presenting ourselves as the ideal prey, whether for investiture or consumption. Once we have been dragged back to the hive, we like to reveal our true forms and decimate the whole population, queen first. We even release any captives we can, and find our reproductive needs are well met by taking hostile shamans. There is a certain sweet irony to it.

  I don't expect you to trust us. We certainly don't trust you. But we hope to, one day. The invae are unlikely to stop coming for this Age, and we will take great pleasure in hunting them at your side and hope you will be willing to give us that chance. Nothing would give us greater pleasure.
- Praxis

- POST FILTER: OFF

- Well, that didn't sound ill-tempered at all!
- Ma'Fan

- I would take nothing about that post at face value.
- Thorn

ORCHID MANTIS

Painfully beautiful and supremely lethal, orchid mantises exploit pheromones to draw in their prey. They are also highly skilled into manipulating shamans into summoning new mantids when promising hosts are found. Their intelligence and ability to work as a coordinated group make them particularly frightening.

GAME INFORMATION

Orchid mantises possess the Empathy power (p. 190, *Howling Shadows*) in all forms.

- On the other hand, our sister breed, the orchid, is not so benevolent. True, they take the same pleasure in hunting other invae as we do; orchids enjoy breeding very much. It is an instinct with them—they really can't help it. But that should not give you any pause in defending yourself. They will seek to draw you in, and the particularly good merges will likely ravish you in a mortal fashion before taking you back to their nest to seduce you into becoming a willing host.
- Praxis

- I'm trying to decide if I shouldn't trust you because you'd sell out your own kind, or because you'd appear to do it to get closer to us.
- Clockwork

- I was told about you. Fortunately, I know exactly how to handle your type.
- Praxis

- Really? Any tips? I've been looking for something for years.
- Pistons

- It's easy, my dear. Ignore him.
- Praxis

- Oh, whatever.
- Clockwork

MOSQUITOS

VAMPIRE MOSQUITO

The vampire mosquito is a particularly voracious hunter. Their hunting seems to be based on more than just normal physical sustenance; a deeper appetite seems to be involved.

GAME INFORMATION

While they do not appear to have any direct connection to HMHVV, they possess the Essence Loss weakness like Vampires. This leads them to feed more frequently, making them a significantly greater threat.

- Oh, there's a connection, all right. Vampire mosquitos love investing infected.
- Red

- Maybe like attracts like?
- Clockwork

- If you want to make friends with an infected, take one of these down.
- Hannibelle

- Don't like the competition, huh?
- Clockwork

- I suppose it takes one to know one?
- Clockwork

- What the fuck?
- Clockwork

- Oh my God, it works ...
- Pistons

TICKS/FLEAS

These are perhaps not as pesky as you might suppose. They lack the prime advantage of their smaller kin: undetectability. With their metahuman size, they simply cannot hide in fur or plants, waiting for the chance to drain a little blood from a hapless target. They need more cunning and the ability to sneak up on their prey, and they need speed to get away from these assaults. Sadly, they often lack these traits, so their efforts to feed lead to harm coming to them. The fact that they persist has led scholars to believe that they breed faster than other spirits, using numbers to give them the advantage that their skills do not.

GAME INFORMATION

Ticks and fleas lack the flight ability of most mosquitoes but make up for it by virtue of all individuals having the Essence Drain power, not just the females. All ticks and fleas possess the Pestilence power.

- "Not as pesky," hell. These things are a blight. Firewatch teams hunt them by watching for plague patterns correlating with drained victims. Forensic magic can tell the difference between them and plague-bearing infected. Left unchecked, they make vampires look like candy goths.
- Red

- You can't lessen the horror of your nature by comparison, Red.
- Ethernaut

- I can try.
- Red

MOTHS

An elusive and solitary breed, moth insect spirits are often the subject of local myths and wild speculation. Sightings of flying humanoids, often identified as moths, date back to the pre-Awakening mid-twentieth century. They were often associated with coming disasters, though merely as harbingers rather than direct actors.

Moths are often hunted as prey by other insect spirits. While there is, as yet, no research to explain why, it is believed that the physical or metaphysical matter of their bodies is rich in nutrients for them. What effect this may have for them, from absorbed spiritual force to simple favorable flavor, no one knows.

GAME INFORMATION

All moth spirits have the Flight skill (p. 394, *SR5*) and can fly.

DEATH'S HEAD MOTH

These fascinating specimens are capable of manipulating their astral signature to flawlessly replicate the signature of other insect spirit types. This allows them to infiltrate the hives of other insect spirits to pilfer their resources, and perhaps even steal their prepared hosts. They are viewed as a menace by other bug spirits, and they would join in an effort to eliminate them if it were not for the fact that the death's head moths make all other breeds quite nervous.

GAME INFORMATION

The death's head moth primarily scavenges off other insect spirits, most often bee spirits. They possess the Aura Masking power (p. 194, *Street Grimoire*) and always have the Impersonation skill.

- This goes much further than attacking other insects, though. The death's head in a good merge is the ultimate serial killer. They get very close to their prey, innocent as a lamb. I suspect they hone their skills on metahumans before going after bigger game.
- Red

CRYPTID MOTH

A highly secretive breed, cryptid moths will stalk potential targets for investment at a distance for an extended period of time. Whether this affects their rate of achieving good merges is unknown. Their secretiveness is effective, though, in that almost nothing is known about these spirits, other than the few sightings of them are accompanied by what observers describe as a crushing dread.

GAME INFORMATION

Cryptid moths possess the Innate Spell (Foreboding) power.

- It's funny, but the dread they inspire can be as much of a liability in stalking their prey as a benefit. There's a theory that their merges are better because they subsume their victim's will with despair and dread. There was a rash of them sighted in West Virginia a couple years back—which was where the whole legend started, incidentally—but they've turned up all over since.
- Hard Exit

ROACH

CAVE ROACHES

Rather than dig burrows, or inhabit buildings, cave roaches prefer to populate natural cave systems. This limits their range of habitats, as they stay away from civilization for the most part, and certain low-lying swampy areas are often not amenable to them. The fact that much of the world contains significant amounts of unexplored caves, though, should give one pause when wandering out into wild areas, as these beings could possibly be hidden just out of sight.

GAME INFORMATION

Cave roaches all have the Reduced Sense (Blind) weakness, although having astral sight, they are not severely hampered by this blindness.

- You don't see a lot of these. They tend to congregate in the wilderness, but you can still find them in old mine shafts. Prey is found among animals or isolated settlements. They're fierce, but lazy. Firewatch usually sends squads that need seasoning against them.
- Picador

SILVERFISH

Silverfish are a subtype of roach insect spirit that are entirely nocturnal. They prefer moist areas and require a diet with an extremely high sugar content. The first known instance of these spirits was an infestation of an Aztechnology cola bottling plant. They are all too good at getting into

spaces where people do not want them to be—so much so that would-be infiltrators might be wise to study them to find out what overlooked passages might exist.

GAME INFORMATION

Silverfish possess the Dietary Requirement (Sugar) weakness.

- AZT ends up hunting these fraggers more than most on account of their vast food production holdings. Of course, I wouldn't be too surprised to find a lone hunter waiting outside a Stuffer Shack for some poor slot sucking down a troll-sized Ludivenko Fizzygoo.
- Pyramid Watcher

- There was a case of this in Tír Tairngire six months ago. Seems the damned things hit a vineyard right at harvest time.
- Thorn

SAMPLE INVESTED HOSTS

GHOUL TICK FLESH FORM INSECT SPIRIT SCOUT

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDG	M
1	3	5	4	5	1	4	1	5.0	3	4

Initiative	9 + 1D6
Movement	As base metatype
Condition Monitor	12/11
Limits	Physical 8, Mental 5, Social 4
Armor	1
Skills	Assensing 4, Perception 5, Running 3, Sneaking 6, Unarmed Combat 6
Powers	Armor 1, Aura Masking, Dual Natured, Enhanced Senses (Hearing, Smell), Essence Drain, Immunity to Normal Weapons, Natural Weapon (Claws: DV (Str+1)P, AP –1), Pestilence, Realistic Form, Sapience
Weaknesses	Allergy (Insecticide, Severe), Allergy (Sunlight, Moderate), Dietary Requirement (Metahuman Flesh), Reduced Senses (Blind)
Notes	Force 4 Insect Spirit

Statistics given are for a standard human ghoul who's retained most of his intellect; for other metaspecies, use the Metatype Attribute Modifiers table (see p. 66, *SR5*) as appropriate and recalculate the ghoul's Condition Monitors and limits. Some ghouls may have the Adept, Magician, or Mystic Adept qualities.

JUGGERNAUT FLESH FORM GOLIATH BEETLE SPIRIT SOLDIER

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDG	M
20	6	5	42	9	1	3	1	6.0	4	5

Initiative	8+1D6
Movement	x3/x5/+4
Condition Monitor	32/13
Limits	Physical 37, Mental 5, Social 6
Armor	18H
Skills	Perception 4, Running 7, Unarmed Combat 4
Powers	Aura Masking, Dual Natured, Enhanced Senses (Hearing, Smell, Motion Detection), Fear, Hardened Armor (18), Immunity (Cold, Fire, Normal Weapons, Pathogens, Toxins), Natural Weapon (Claws: DV 42P, AP –4), Realistic Form, Toughness (12)
Weaknesses	Allergy (Insecticide, Light), Reduced Senses (Sight)
Note	+4 Reach, Force 5 Insect Spirit, +4 to Damage Resistance tests

CHIMPANZEE HYBRID FORM ROACH SPIRIT SCOUT

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDG	M
4	4	4	4	3	2	4	3	6.0	2	3

Initiative	8 + 1D6
Movement	x2/x4/+2
Condition Monitor	11/10
Limits	Physical 8, Mental 4, Social 5
Armor	0
Skills	Assensing 3, Astral Combat 3, Gymnastics 3, Perception 3, Sneaking 3, Unarmed Combat 3
Powers	Brachiation, Dual Natured, Immunity to Normal Weapons, Natural Weapon (Bite: DV (Str+2)P, AP—)
Weaknesses	Allergy (Insecticides, Severe), Allergy (Light, Mild)
Note	Force 3 Insect Spirit, +2 to Damage Resistance Tests

OPTIONAL RULES: PLAYABLE FREE INSECT SPIRIT

Free insect spirits should only be played with a gamemaster's permission. Their nature as spirits and several of their powers (most notably Immunity to Normal Weapons and Flight) can create several gameplay difficulties that may not

be suitable for a player character in every game. However, if a character is played as an insect spirit primarily for storytelling purposes, there is great potential for betrayal, redemption, and drama. Playing an insect spirit should be limited to groups operating at Prime Runner level. Only flesh form (Inhabitation, p. 196, *Street Grimoire*) spirits are viable as player characters.

Every free insect spirit gains begins play with Magic 1, though the Magician, Adept, Mystic Adept, or Aspected Mage qualities may be purchased as usual during character creation (when using the Point Buy system, p. 64, *Run Faster*). Free insect spirits learn and cast spells as usual, although they never need spell formula. Spells are learned intuitively from observing the mana flow. Learning a new spell still takes time and Karma as usual. Being an inhabiting spirit, free insect spirits can never learn skills from the Conjuring skill group nor can they astrally project. They also cannot select the Mentor Spirit quality.

Free insect spirits gain the following critter powers: Aura Masking, Dual-Natured, Enhanced Senses (Smell, Thermographic Vision), Immunity to Normal Weapons, Realistic Form, plus any powers specific to their insect type. Free insect spirits gain the weakness Allergy (Insecticides, level as described by spirit type) in addition to any weaknesses specific to their insect type. They also may purchase one optional power for every three full points of Magic they possess for 9 Karma each. They may select from the following: Animal Control (Insect Type), Compulsion, Confusion, Enhanced Senses (Ultrasound), Fear, Search.

Creating a free insect spirit is just the same as creating any other character. The Point Buy system must be used, and the Free Insect Spirit quality is purchased for 42 Karma during character creation when qualities are purchased, and the various benefits and penalties are assigned. The normal limit of 25 Karma worth of Positive Qualities does not apply to the Free Insect Spirit quality, though the limit on 25 Karma worth of Negative Qualities remains in place. Newly created Free Insect Spirit characters are assumed to have been recently Invested. Minimum and maximum attributes, inherent metatype abilities, augmentations, and Essence are unaffected. Free insect spirits can be of any breed, although solitary types are the most common.

It is possible that a character may become Invested in the course of playing *Shadowrun*. If the character has any unspent Karma at that point, it needs to be spent paying off the cost of the acquired quality. If the character does not have enough unspent Karma to pay that amount, they need to spend all Karma they earn on the quality until it is fully paid off. Note that the Immunity to Normal Weapons power may bring some difficulties to characters who want to acquire further augmentations. Street docs who can wield a scalpel weapon focus don't grow on trees.

Free insect spirits are almost always considered scout insect spirits, although females may be nymphs with the potential to evolve into a queen. If a nymph evolves into a queen through the course of play, the character becomes an NPC and gains all the listed powers of a queen (p. 99, *Street Grimoire*). Player-controlled free insect spirits never begin play bound to a queen, though they may become bound to one over the course of play. This does not make the character immediately unplayable, though their actions at the queen's command may put them at odds with their allies very quickly.

NOTES FOR GMS ON THE INHABITATION POWER

True forms, hybrid forms, and flesh forms all have a Magic attribute equal to the Force of the possessing spirit. True forms have an Essence equal to the Force of the possessing spirit and an Edge equal to (Force of the possessing spirit / 2). Hybrid Forms have an Essence equal to the host and an Edge equal to the possessing spirit's (Force / 2). Flesh forms have the Essence and Edge of the host. Insect spirits have the Allergy (Insecticides, [level as described by spirit type]) regardless of form.

MAROONED SPIRITS

Amber peered out into the darkness through the narrowest slit of the blinds. "Are you sure they're gone?"

"I checked all over outside. Nothing," Blake responded reassuringly.

Amber felt a slight shiver run up her spine. She believed him. Blake wouldn't lie to her right now. He wasn't above a little practical joke at her expense, but he knew she was terrified—and for good reason.

The six of them, three couples, had left town for the long weekend, renting a lakeside cabin to celebrate the end of summer. They were all headed down different paths now that high school was over; she wasn't even sure she and Blake would be together in a week. He had the Talent, and she was good at crunching numbers. Their plans weren't the same, but that didn't matter now.

Tomorrow wasn't going to come.

Deena's cut-off scream led them to her body hours ago. Her neck was snapped. Killian's body was floating in the lake. Tasha looked like she had been chewed on. And John—he was just missing. He went out to look for Tasha and never came back.

Now it was just Amber and Blake.

They'd seen what did it. Well, at least they thought so. It was dark outside, and the thing looked like a person but all wet and slimy. Blake thought it had algae growing on it and figured maybe it was a spirit of the water of some kind. When he went to project and look, though, he didn't find anything. Just an abnormally high background, but that meant nothing to Amber.

"We need to get out of here." Amber's voice cracked with her panic.

"We need to sit tight and wait this out. Look what happened to everyone else. We can't go running around in the woods in the dark." Blake was calmer than Amber thought he should be. Then again, he was often the levelheaded one in strange situations. He claimed it was his magic.

She thought it was more like over-confidence than anything else.

Her expression obviously made Blake think he hadn't convinced her, as he continued, "If we wait until it's light, we have a better chance. And while we're in here, we can see things coming."

Amber's posture softened a little. He was right. They had a better chance of defending themselves or escaping if they could see what was coming. Even so, it didn't change the massive knot of fear in her gut. She wondered if she should be more upset by her dead friends, but fear topped grief at the moment. This whole ordeal was going to merit years of therapy.

If she survived that long.

"I'll keep an eye out while you get some rest," Blake suggested.

Amber didn't feel tired, but still, the suggestion was appealing, because it was a chance to escape. "A little sleep will do me good," she said as she lay down on the couch. The world faded to black far faster than she expected.

A short while later she awoke, startled by her strange dreams—only to see all four of her dead friends, and Blake, talking. Just sitting there, all together, but a little worse for the wear.

"We don't need her," said Blake. "We have no more need of a form."

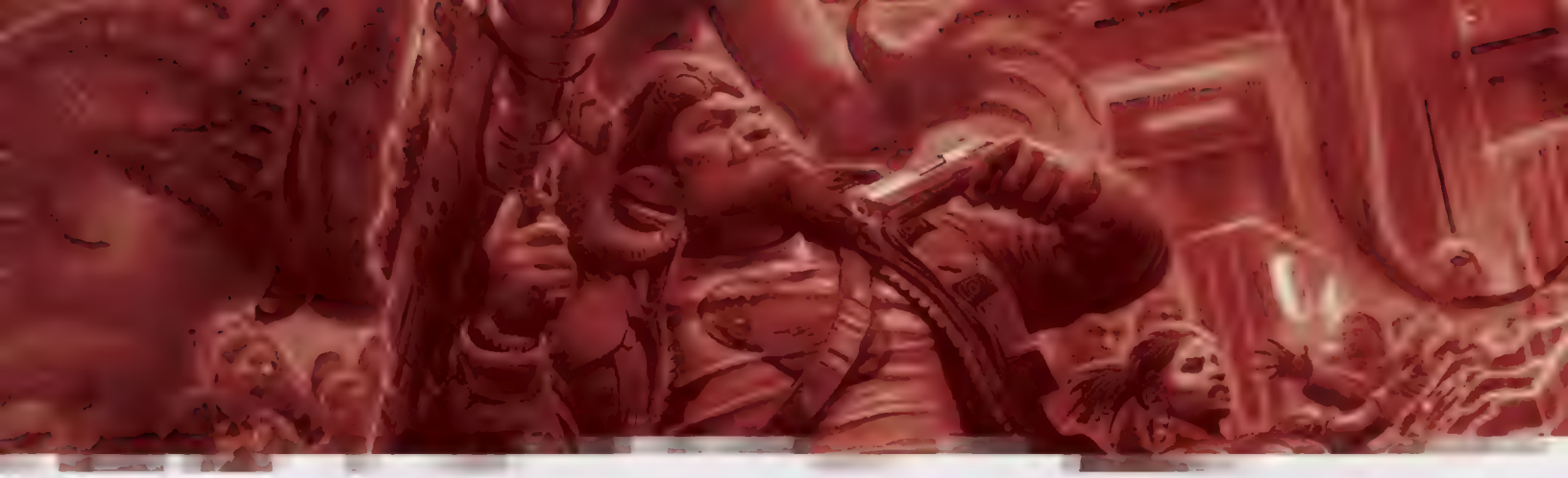
"I could use one in a little better shape." That was Tasha, words sounding mushy coming from her gnawed-on jaw. "We couldn't all just snatch the mage's body. Maybe kill her neatly so I don't look so gruesome."

Amber tried to rise and run, but invisible bonds kept her immobile against the couch. She tried to scream but couldn't even move enough to make a noise.

They all looked toward her. Killian, still blue-faced, spoke next. "Leave her. Others will think her mad, and for those who believe her, it will sow fear. It's a win for all."

Without another word, all five walked out of the cabin. None looked back.

The forces binding and silencing Amber ceased, but she didn't move. She lay there, closed her eyes, and hoped that she would wake a second time to find it was all a dream.



TALES FROM THE CRYPT

POSTED BY: DR. PATRICIA LOVELAND

I thought it a good idea to remind us of what this is all about. A few posts from various folks over the years that demonstrate the terror the shedim bring to our world. Sorry in advance for the nightmares.

ERIN DAVIDSON

Age 31; 04/14/2061
New Orleans, Louisiana, CAS

We can't win. When they fall, they don't stay down. I've shot them everywhere. Leg shots make them "limp" but they don't slow down. Arm shots create jagged bones for them to stab people. Center mass is useless—it just makes them ooze. If they're still juicy. Even head shots, the end-all, be-all, just make them more horrifying to look at.

It doesn't slow them.

It doesn't kill them.

They just keep coming.

I'm Erin Davidson, Lone Star Special Response Officer, New Orleans Office, recording a statement of events for April 14, 2061. I will not go gentle into this good night ... but I know I will not see the sunrise.

DYLAN BORSIN

Age 13; 01/04/2062
Roseau, Minnesota, UCAS

It's happening. That day no one thought would ever come. The dead are rising. I can't imagine what the cities are like right now. I got into the local mall. It's always been my plan for this. I've got food, clothes, and there's even a Weapons World, though I'll probably have a tough time breaking in. Maybe Ares will send someone once I set off the alarm, though they're probably too busy. I haven't seen anyone else in the mall yet, but I'm sure a few people will make it. If I can get into WW by morning I'll go up on the roof and look around. Maybe try and bring over some more survivors for company.

Maybe Serena made it. I wouldn't mind spending the apocalypse with her. Maybe we could rebuild the world together after. That would be really cool. I'll check in again later to update everyone. Hopefully I can get this uploaded and out to the world before this spreads or gets too far.

- He never posted again, but this auto-uploaded. No news reports out of Roseau mentioned anything about this event. Take that however you will, but I have a feeling this place may be a secluded haven for the shedim—they got control, then kept a lid on things.
- Glitch

GALENA GISHEN

Age 5; 07/13/2074
Copperton, Virginia, CAS

I am sooooo super-excited. Mommy's back! Daddy said she would never come back. He said she was in a better place, but I didn't believe that. Mommy wouldn't go to a better place and not take me. Maybe not Daddy; he's mean. Especially after he pushed her down the stairs and told me to tell the policemen that she fell. That's when the ambulance took her to the better place. But she'd always take me. She'd come back and get me to take me.

And now she has.

CELIA HANSWIT

Age 18; 12/26/2061
Orland Park, Illinois, UCAS

I think something's seriously wrong with TJ. He's been acting strange since he came back from his meeting with the instructors at MIT&T. He's been sleeping a lot and seems distant. We had a

little fight before he projected, but I apologized as soon as he got back because it was dumb. I'm just afraid of losing him if he moves so far away. I caught a snippet of some kind of big news in DeeCee but can't find anything on it right now. I'm reaching out to a few friends with different news access. I hope it's nothing bad and I hope it hasn't hurt TJ in some way. Maybe he swung through there while he was out.

- Hanswit was found dead several weeks later. She killed herself. She left a note about how she couldn't live without TJ. Investigators looked into it just in case and the only oddity was TJ's lack of emotion over the whole thing. The local police reports described him as "sociopathic."
- Stone

CHUKO

Age 27; 02/14/2062
Cawifa Village, Congo Tribal Lands

We need help. Our tribe is not safe. The elders have returned from the Hill of Souls with no explanation for the strange events of the past week. They claim the ancestors are silent on the stalking dead, but five tribe members have been killed by them already. I've visited the hill and seen the abandoned graves of Hika, Ashkila, and Kiwava, all long dead. They've risen to stalk the living, but we don't know why. The silence of the ancestors is not a good omen.

EKSHAN KIRIVEK

Age 43; 01/19/2073
Norilsk, Yakut

They stalk closer and I fear we cannot keep up this pace to stay ahead of them. It was easy with the Snowcat, but the solar cells aren't charging fast enough to keep me moving. And we must keep moving. When they rose from the icy ground, I didn't know what to make of them. When they killed Teshka, I tried to get revenge, but even shattering their frozen forms barely fazed them. We ran, the six of us, in the Snowcat. We drove south, but they've kept coming. They're tireless. While we have swapped drivers and pushed the batteries to their limits alongside the multi-fuel system and the solar cells, it has not been enough. Now we're out of fuel, the cells aren't fast enough, and the batteries are drained. We'll need to go on foot, but I've seen them in the distance from the rise. They're moving slowly but steadily towards us. We've discussed splitting up, but that was mostly Kireek, because he knows he's the fittest and fastest. He doesn't want to be slowed by the likes of us. Enesha and I want to stay together. Not because we fear being left behind, but because at some point even the fittest will need to sleep, and we'll need someone watching our backs.

We'll keep heading south. Norilsk should not be far.

- This one uploaded when the link was brought into town but Ekshan wasn't with it. This was several months after the recording.
- Bull

VICE

Age (undisclosed); 12/03/2076
Vladivostok, Russia

It's been many years since the day I first encountered these things, but I figure the tale is worth telling.

On Christmas Eve in '61, we were hired for a gig that had nothing to do with shedim because they weren't even around yet. Our job was to infiltrate an abandoned corp facility at the edge of the Kermadec Trench in New Zealand. We came down to the infiltration point, a substation one kilometer over the main facility. It was easier for pressure purposes, we heard. It didn't take long to get the pressurizing systems back up and running, and we let the system adjust. Nothing wrong yet.

Next step was a quick ride in an "elevator" car down to the actual facility. The moment the door of that car opened up, all the normalcy of the last few hours flashed away in a blink.

The smell hit us first. Stale death just starting to freshen back up.

We saw why just as quickly, but the mind often processes smells first, a subconscious warning system. And we were warned. The floors of the hall outside the doors from the elevator were lined with bodies. Some slumped, some seated. They'd been sealed down in the depths when the place went offline in the mid-'50s and the sterile, over-pressurized coffin they were all sharing was suddenly balancing back out.

The smell became sickening within seconds as we walked over the bodies and searched for our quarry. It was eerie enough that our street sam was so on edge that he hung back at the doors of the elevator to "keep our six clear," but we all knew it was to be close to a bailout point.

With the creep factor through the roof, plus the depth, I was avoiding astral peeks. That was my mistake. It might have helped before everything went to drek.

We'd managed to scope about half the place when I got brushed with some off-mana. The background must have jumped as the rift opened. I warned the team, but no amount of warning helps when the corpses all around you get up to come after you.

Rebel, our street sam back at the elevator, came under attack first. From the way he started screaming over the comms right away, we completely expected to get left behind. He held his ground as the "zombies," as he called them, stumbled forward en masse to attack him. They had nothing on him for speed back then, but numbers mean a lot. He was lucky a bunch split to go after others.

Now I know their methods, but these early days were filled with fear, and the shedim were fueled by it. To this day, they still creep me out when they decide to inhabit damaged bodies. It's just creepy.

Rebel held the elevator hallway, we dragged out Spencer and Silver, and we lost Crusher because the hordes didn't stop coming, and he shouldn't have tried to stand against them. We had some data we pulled up later and found out the place was shut down with over three hundred employees still down there. We barely scratched the surface.

I managed to zip out onto the astral once we were in the elevator, and I saw a glow from the trench. A

rift, likely similar to the one at the Watergate, was spilling out these "jellyfish" spirits. Many went for the habitat, but plenty headed up toward the surface. A few even hovered around our elevator, probably waiting for Spencer or Silver to ice off, but they lost interest after I laid a little healing into the pair.

We came to the surface, heard about the comet, the rift in DeeCee, and the description of astral jellyfish that most people use for shedim, and made a quick connection.

It was early. It was horrible. And it can still happen today in places where you don't expect. These things are adapting to their new situation, not just dying off peacefully.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Since they've only been here since 2061, their history should be brief, but they've become prolific over the last almost twenty years. We had no sightings of the shedim prior to 2061 and the passage of Halley's Comet. They've been tracked back to the Watergate Rift, though a few other access rifts were rumored to exist. The ending of Vice's story tends to lend credence to that assessment.

When they first arrived, it was a night of horror, followed by several years of confusion and terrible information gathering. The shedim were first thought to be zombies because they inhabited empty shells of the formerly living. This meant anything from a corpse to a mage gallivanting about the astral was fair game for a little spiritual inhabitation. Corpses are obviously abundant, so the shedim chose those early on. Cemeteries erupted with what looked like the walking dead, and they ran roughshod over the world.

Eventually they must have gotten sick of getting ejected from shattered corpses, because they got smarter and stopped shambling around graveyards. They also became more acclimated to our metaplane, which took a lot of learning since they had zero understanding of anything other than "food" and "shelter."

Shift forward to 2064, and Badr al Din Ibn Eisa, leader of the Islamic Unity Movement and declarer of the New Islamic Jihad, is revealed as a master shedim. Shedim had infiltrated the entire organization. Prior to this, most shedim were shambling corpses, feral spirits just trying to survive. The presence of the Master now meant they had an agenda and the ability to gather a force. It was definitely a shock to the shadows, but not really to the rest of the world because the megacorps were, and still are, really good at playing down things that might spook their workforce.

Slide up another decade and no other masters had achieved al Din Ibn Eisa's power—or so we thought. Evan Corcoran infiltrated shedim into the UCAS DSA as operatives that were so creatively referred to as "Shades." Turns out even the President knew and put it down as one of those simple better-they-work-for-us-than-against-us situations.

There's more bits and pieces and stories throughout the year. The shedim are absolutely terrifying, but their growth here was abruptly halted when Ghostwalker and his band of misfits sealed the Watergate Rift in DeeCee. The move must have closed other rifts because ever since, the shedim's numbers have dropped. No new ones are coming over to replace their banished counterparts.

Yay! We win! Right?

Nope.

The masters have just turned their attention toward different avenues. I'll cover more on these things later, but for now, the shedim hit a major snag in 2076. A snag that may end their time on this metaplane forever, or push them back deeper into the shadows.

Not exactly a good thing for people in the shadowrunner line of work.

- Another master was pushed out of Denver as well. It had a conclave in the Aurora Warrens, but the Azzies weren't keen on the shedims' continued existence. The Azzies didn't manage to wipe them out, but did a solid job of dwindling their numbers and making it a "not our problem" kind of issue now.
- Ethernaut

- So there's another wounded-but-not-eliminated master shedim plotting a comeback? Yay.
- Jimmy No

HOTSPOTS (FOR COLD CORPSES)

Anywhere in the world that mages project or people die (and aren't cremated), you could find a nest of shedim. When they first arrived, they truly lacked rhyme or reason for fleeing the spots where they found themselves, leading to so-called "hotspots." Since then, the shedim have been more deliberate about where they summon more of their kind or where they gather. Each

spot offers access to host bodies, but the reasons why those hosts are available varies between the sites, and there are some places that they use to avoid civilization for now. Here's the lowdown on some spots where you can find concentrations of shedim, and what they are up to there.

NEW ORLEANS

Since New Orleans has long been known for its powerful mystical connections, one might think that's what draws the shedim here, but that is not the case. The shedim who call the Big Easy home do so because a destroyed body and temporary disruption can be quickly remedied with special graveyards. Since New Orleans sits below sea level and the water table is so high, digging down to create a standard two-meter grave is impossible. Instead, the dead are laid to rest in above-ground graves and mausoleums. These graves are a whole lot easier to escape than the ones with two meters of dirt above a sealed concrete vault. Other shedim know the trick and can help as well, though the graveyards of New Orleans are not without their own protectors these days.

Knowing the shedim issue, the wealthier property owners will pay to have their family's crypts warded (or just opt for cremation, but some people still have a problem with that). Some gangs have claim graveyards as their turf, or they use them as neutral ground to dispute turf issues with minimal risk of collateral injuries.

- The Crypt gangs aren't totally unique to New Orleans, but they do have the largest number. They often claim or battle over turf that they believe holds an ancestor. A few are fanatical and quite disconnected from reality, so be warned. You might laugh at that ancestor garbage, but they're willing to kill over it.
- Lyran

- Warded mausoleums are popular spots to hide valuables and host meetings with runners in New Orleans. It's creepy but it's warded, and surveillance is obvious. But warding is the norm with the threat of shedim.
- Fianchetto

- Several arcane societies, especially those that see themselves as protectors, keep an eye on the graveyards here. Especially if they assault a nest of shedim while the shedim are trying to find a new shell to anchor them to our plane.
- Ethernaut

- The Brotherhood of Darkness and Order of St. Sylvester often hire runners to fill in their numbers on jobs like this. It's not easy and it can be frustrating to not be in charge of a job, but it's a proven strategy.
- Stone

LOS ANGELES

When the quakes rocked LA in 2069, they devastated several areas so badly that no one went in to clean up the mess. That mess included thousands of dead bodies—a magnet for the shedim. Large nests of them have risen around LA, and some clusters are quite inventive in their choice of habitation.

Collapsed buildings left thousands of people dead, some crushed, some starved or dehydrated while trapped. Groups of shedim found these bodies, inhabited them, and then dug their way out. Afterward, they found a nice, safe place to gather, and they reinforced their selected spot. They've built several entries and exits, which they've filled with traps and collapsing points. We've tried to bomb their wrecked-out homes, but their reinforcements hold, and they just dig the tunnels right back out.

Those who died in the flood but hadn't succumbed to the ravages of nature were also an easy source of bodies. Once in the bodies, though, it doesn't matter to the shedim how long they sit in the water and rot; they regenerate fast enough to prevent any decomposition. This has allowed them to create collections of small underwater bases. These bases are deep enough that metahumans can only reach them with diving gear, and most bases are still filled with water with the exception of a few small pockets of air.

In my efforts to study these bases, I've visited several of these places, and they are nightmare realms. Not all of the bodies are in use; some are left around in case of disruption. Swimming in the pitch-black murky water with nothing but a flashlight, it doesn't matter how brave you are. You startle when you come across a random corpse no matter what.

- What's the shedim endgame here?
- Balladeer

- A power base? Somewhere to fall back to? A meeting place? A secret lair? I haven't seen anything resembling a concentrated effort from the shedim in this area of the coast. Either they're really not up to anything, or they're

really sneaky and we have no idea what they've planned to do. Place bets on the latter.

- Sounder

LA isn't the only problem area in the PCC. Rumors are circulating through several different channels that the shedim have completely infiltrated and taken over the Painted Horse Lodge in Pueblo. Though small, the lodge has powerful arcane connections and could be using its link to other lodges to further the agenda of the shedim, which right now seems like self-preservation through any and all means necessary. I only report this here because it's come from enough independent sources that, true or not, it's dangerous to the lodge for this many people to think their members are a bunch of replacements.

- The shedim set up a job where all of the PHL members would be out of their bodies, and then used a runner team to secure the site and take the bodies. From the reports I've gotten, they then moved off-site into a warded location, and the PHL shamans ran out of time. As for connections to other lodges and power, it's not likely. The other lodges were the first place they ran when their bodies got snagged to warn them all.
- Fianchetto

- Rumors say the shedim who took over are doing some sweet-talking and damage control, getting other lodges to believe that they aren't shedim. Not sure how they managed to pull that off, but I have guys who are part of the PHL in Santa Fe who have no problem with the Pueblo group.
- Mika

FLATWILLOW, SIOUX NATION

To stick with NAN theme, I'll mention Flatwillow. It's a former Montana town where the inhabitants completely died out during the relocation years when the state went to the Sioux. In the late '50s, a go-gang started using the abandoned buildings as a headquarters and continued until 2062—early January, to further narrow the date so you can see where this is going. That first batch of shedim that popped out with Ghostwalker found their way to the local cemetery in Flatwillow, grabbed some shells, dug their way up, and proceeded to take the town for themselves by taking over the gang (after killing them). Since then, the town has grown as a gathering place and stopover point for shedim in this region as well as the central hub for their efforts to draw power from Yellowstone, another potential source of mana that can be used to reopen a rift for more of their kind to come over—and to remove the permanence of their death here.

- I know several go-gangs that still stop at Flatwillow. We may know the dangers, but others don't.
- 2XL

"Why don't the Wildcats just go in and clean house here?" Since everyone asks, I'll share a story that explains why the shedim are so dangerous. In 2074, the Sioux Nation sent in a team of Wildcats and two dozen more members of the Sioux military to stop the shedim at Flatwillow. By the end of the assault, the town was burning. The Wildcats had managed to push the shedim back into a nearby mine. The Wildcats pursued, returned an hour later, ordered the mine blasted shut, and everyone went home.

Less than a month later, the town was rebuilt better than it was before, but the mine was dug back open *from the inside.* Turns out the shedim stored extra bodies in the mines, and they wore them out while breaking free. The townspeople called in seven retired Wildcats over the next several months, but the Wildcats were overwhelmed. Whenever a Wildcat fell, the shedim took over, and suddenly their side was better armed and armored.

- A second attempt to just bomb the place into oblivion was shot down in the councils as a waste of resources. Despite years of rumors of people going missing in and near the town, and then reappearing to settle there, no one was willing to bomb one of their own small towns to deal with the shedim.
- Mika

- Someday that choice will come back and bite them on the hoop.
- Bull

- Literally! Haha!
- Slamm-0!

YAKUT

As if they needed any more groups of deranged magical creatures joining their land of mystic misfits, the nation of Yakut has become a Mecca for many shedim on the Asian continent. Yakut's powerful magic, its population of frowned-upon

beings—it all makes an easy place to hide. The shedim are working in small groups all over the massive nation with a central hub of power in the city of Yakutsk. The harsh environments of the region hardly faze them, allowing them to operate in many places that others cannot.

Though they work all over the nation, it's obvious that they want access or control over the region around Tunguska. Anyone with a simple search agent can learn the history of this area, and anyone with a little understanding of the history of magic will know that a location with an event like that in its past will have some mojo flowing into it. Arcane theories on this place abound, but the shedim are chasing the one involving a thinning between this place and several metaplanes that allows access to other realms. They're hoping they can use it to reach over and reconnect with their own realm.

- Tunguska is a powerful site; everyone wants a piece of it. The shedim aren't just gonna walk in and take it over. The government of Yakut understands this value and has a lot of its own security forces working in the area to prevent anyone from settling in for too long. A short visit is all fine, but anyone who looks like they're trying to settle down gets chased off.
- Red Anya

- And Yakut has a lot of Awakened forces. This is a dangerous place for spirits who are toast if they're disrupted in the astral. Trashing the body and sending them scurrying for another shell is common in other places, but here the freed shedim is a target for astral assaults.
- Picador

ANTARCTICA

I'd love to say that I got all this intel without ever having to expose myself to the frigid nightmare that is Antarctica, but no, I actually went down that rabbit hole in search of information. Attaching myself to a corporate research team, I zipped around the Antarctic astral in search of signs of shedim. It wasn't easy. It's a giant sheet of virtually lifeless ice, and looking for lifeless shells shambling along was like looking for a grain of white sand in a bag of flour. But a lot of hours spent out there eventually paid off. And once I found one, it was easier to find more.

They're down there looking for a portal, which is actually what the corporate research team sought as well. This gateway is supposedly a permanently open pathway to the metaplanes that the shedim probably want to adjust to reconnect to home. It's speculation, but there's no other reason for them to look for it. They want to use it for something, plain and simple. From what my team knows, it's been buried, but digging it up is feasible. More rumors abound about things moving in and out of the gateway near the site, but since I've seen none of that, I can't confirm, just add to the rumormongering!

The methods of the shedim are the important part here, because they're not normal: When they find an encampment, they infiltrate it and then contact others to add to their numbers. After they wipe them out and get all their data, they all walk back out into the cold to keep searching.

- I've seen horror trids with more pleasant plots!
- Slamm-0!

- A few of those encampments got distress calls out, but the corps in the area have no interest in helping. Several corps have warships in the surrounding waters, and those ships simply target the signal and obliterate a small chunk of the ice sheet. This leads me to believe that they know it's the shedim and are just using the scorched-earth method of problem solving. Gotta love the megacorps!
- Stone

If you end up on the ice or at a station and suspect shedim, be wary. The ones on this continent tend to be a little tougher than normal. Life in the icy wastes is hard, and even body-stealing spirits face some of the harsher aspects of the elements. Their regenerative abilities handle most basic frostbite issues, but sometimes a major storm will drop the temps down so far that they can't keep up. The fact that the mana here is also a little thin tends to mean tougher spirits, too. They're hindered by the thin mana but make up for it with sheer power.

AFRICA

Even though the initial rift was in North America, travel through astral space is quite rapid. Well, that and Watergate wasn't the only point of access into our plane, but we won't get into that. We'll just focus on how awesome the abundant mass graves of Africa's warzones look to a group of spirits who need empty shells to inhabit in order to stay strong and anchored in our plane. That said, you can guess what kind of problem Africa now has with shedim, especially since it also lacked a serious force to deal with them. The

sheer number of shedim still wandering the continent is staggering. The only force that seems interested in bringing down their numbers is Asamando, and they don't exactly have the best reputation. A lot of local politics goes into trying to convince other nations that even though Asamando is full of ghouls, their people should be allowed to cross borders in order to help with this threat. The problem is, politically, some shedim have become quite savvy.

- There's a version of coyote work here where runners are hired for support, helping slip groups of ghouls out of Asamando to go after sects of shedim. Depending on the job, the ghouls have hired the runners that smuggle them for extra help. This lets the ghouls focus on killing the shedim on the astral once they're ejected from their shattered shells.
- Traveler Jones

One of the most well-organized groups of shedim operate out of the Congo Tribal Lands and disguise themselves in the most benign of shells. African youth, mostly boys, usually hailing from war-torn regions, are calling themselves the Congan Youth Association. This group looks an awful lot like a wonderfully supportive organization that helps young men and women displaced by the wars in Africa. In fact, hundreds of thousands of people around the world donate to them as a worthy cause, not realizing what their nuyen is going toward.

- African cities know that their continent has a shedim problem, but they also have a megacorp problem, a resource problem, a tribal conflict problem, and about a hundred other problems that make focusing on a group that steals dead bodies (not exactly a valuable resource) low on their lists of priorities.
- Traveler Jones

NORTHERN CALFREE

CalFree has taken serious hits over the past few decades. The nation is only about half the size it was when North America broke up, and they're down two major cities. They seem to be falling apart piece by piece, and another piece might be on the chopping block. The disputed patch of land north of Redding all the way to the former California state line has been a hotbed of skirmish warfare for decades. Neither side can follow the old adage to "never leave a fallen soldier behind" when battles get larger or skirmishes are hidden. The initial war left plenty of fallen soldiers. This cornucopia of corpses is a prime location for shedim to pick up a new form. With the fields so close, other shedim have insinuated themselves into the local cities and towns to be close when the bloody body of a California reservist or Tír Peace Force member comes stumbling into town. Once they're greeted and cleaned up, they can slip right into the local shadow community until a new SIN can be put together for them.

Staying here isn't just about helping their fellow zombies. The shedim want something from Mt. Shasta. It's not necessarily an object they're seeking; it could be the location itself for the powerful mana, but Hestaby's former lair also has plenty of artifacts that the shedim could use, even if it's not the key to regaining access to their metaplane.

- This might go a different way. CalFree has contracted quiet conversations with several suspected shedim groups in NorCal, and they just might be making a deal to lock down the territory that Tír Tairngire claims in exchange. It's a deal with the devil, but CalFree is desperate for a win.
- Frosty

- There are rumors of a member of the Black Lodge, who also happens to be a member of the CalFree government, with the ability to summon and control shedim. The rumors started before the shedim got cut off from their plane, but the control aspect of the story could mean that the other rumor is just a play to get access to the shedim. What would the Lodge want to do with a group of shedim? A good guess would be helping them stage an attack on a group the Black Lodge has hated for as long as anyone knows. The elves.
- Lyran

- The town of Mineral has a go-gang called the Gravediggers that operates all over NorCal, through the disputed zone, and up into the Tír. They've made strong connections to several known shedim in the region and rumors abound that the gang's leader, Alexander "The Mortician" Graves, is actually a Master shedim who is slowly infiltrating the rest of the gang with his kind.
- Turbo Bunny

WASHINGTON, D.C. (DEECEE)

This one is big, but I haven't been able to get close and investigate since many of the shedim here are aware of my efforts. Several master shedim showed up in recent months, and vast quantities of their lesser kin have been slowly drifting

into the city. Though the Watergate Rift is closed, the city still has a lot of strong ambient mana lines and focal points where extremely powerful ritual magic can be performed. As we already know, the shedim have infiltrated the UCAS government, so it only begs the question: How deep does this go?

I'll certainly be looking to get a team into the city so that we can figure out what they're up to here, and possibly stop it before we have another incident and the UCAS loses another city.

WHAT WE THINK THEY WANT

It's clear they didn't just come here for the bodies, but the true desires of the shedim on this metaplane are still unknown. Since I've yet to find a master shedim who will spill its guts like a gloating Bond villain, we're stuck with speculation. I've eliminated the truly far-fetched hypotheses and offered them over to Plan 9/10 to post on their personal site.

Several of the hypotheses focus on an invasion of some kind. The idea that the shedim are here to take over and enslave us isn't quite ridiculous enough to send over to Plan 9/10, but it isn't strongly supported by their actions and efforts. They've taken bodies but don't seem to be placing themselves in positions of control and power in large numbers. They've been here for over fifteen years, and if they came here to enslave the living, we should have seen something by now. This has led some to question whether this might simply be an advance force, and the rest of the invading force was cut off when Ghostwalker closed the Watergate Rift. Some think they came and realized there are too many of us. They might not have expected to find a world with billions of people, and they haven't been able to adjust their plan yet.

Some think they are working to "manaform" our plane in order to make it suitable for more of their kind. This is certainly possible, as several places where I've encountered the shedim involve a warped astral landscape. Again, it's an issue of scale, but either way it's shifting our world to be more habitable for them.

Posited, but not well-supported, is the idea that the shedim are actually here mana mining, siphoning off our ambient mana a little at a time and sending it back to their native metaplane. I've seen no evidence of depleted mana in regions they control, just alterations to the aspect of it. The thing about this idea is that I have no way of testing how it might work. They could be shifting mana in small quantities across metaplanes, but doing it in such a low and slow quantity that the ambient flow of mana simply fills the void as fast as it's being created. It's like draining lake that happens to be filled by a river at the same pace.

- More and more, experts are beginning to think this sort of siphoning is possible. And since it involves stealing something that benefits them from regions they may never visit, they're very much into it.
- Elijah

Early studies showed a disconnect between them and their native metaplane, so the idea that they are refugees is one of the most widely accepted. It was discovered early on that the shedim had no ability to return to their native metaplane of their own volition. They could be disrupted or banished and forced back, but none of them could simply return like we are used to with our native spirits. This, along with the fact that they poured through the Watergate Rift behind Ghostwalker, who was also escaping, made many think they were trying to get away from something else—something even worse than them. Perhaps the other native residents of their metaplane kicked them out and then locked the door behind them. Since no one has been able to identify their native metaplane, this is a tough theory to test.

Now, as for what they've been doing here, we have some more solid info. I'll focus on the recent stuff, since their focus changed significantly once they lost their metaplanar access pass. They may still be pursuing some other ends, but it can help narrow down the trouble you might be in if you end up entangled in their drama.

Nearly every group of shedim I have come across is looking for artifacts and other arcane items, presumably something that might allow them to summon more of their kind or possibly open up a new rift and re-establish a connection with their native plane. Sources for these objects range from personal collections to museum vaults to archaeological dig sites. They do a lot of their own dirty work but aren't above hiring runners to help them get what they need when they lack the necessary skillset for acquisition. I have found that

when they do contract out, they have a terrible tendency of trying to bring runners into the fold (or at least into cold storage) after the job is done. Items they're interested in vary, and anything could be of potential value to them, so knowing when you're working for the shedim rather than some other sleazy Johnson is fairly tough.

- The Dagger of Hivas Set supposedly has the power to raise the dead by being plunged into the heart of the deceased. It's supposedly Sumerian, but dating pushes it back a little further. I'm mentioning it here because I've caught plenty of chatter in the fixer community from interested parties seeking its whereabouts. And those interested parties have led to more than one group of shedim.
- Fianchetto

- I've heard of that before. It leaves a triangular scar over the heart of the resurrected. The dagger is older than Hivas Set himself, who famously used it to sacrifice his personal guards to raise them back up. Supposedly they rose with great strength, a fearful presence, and were nearly indestructible.
- Elijah

- The Spirit Flute has been on their radar for a while, too. I don't know if the artifact itself is valuable or if they want it to study its magic and derive another magical item with similar properties that benefit their kind.
- Frosty

Along with items, locations have also been targets of the shedim. Areas that pool mana, boost mana, or seem aspected to spirits or metaplanar travel are high on their list of spots to control or at least get access to in order to study the potential value. They want these places for ritual sites in case they find the right ritual or artifact and boost its potential. The power sites in DeeCee, the caldera and possibly permanent metaplanar gateway in Yellowstone, the blast zone of Tunguska, the Dragon Lines near Boston, the mana wells of Amazonia, and the Four Corners spirit gateway are just a few of the thousands of sites around the world that interest the shedim.

Though these big sites are well-known, the smaller sites are far more numerous. These are the kinds of places the shedim control through fear, possibly even making nightly attacks to slowly wear down the locals and anyone else in the area (like a team of contracted runners). Larger sites tend to see a more political approach from the shedim, though they aren't above an attempted assassination to get the right people in the right places to gain access.

- A contractor out of Azania lost some serious rep and contract cash doing one of these jobs. He was sent after a museum director. Easy gig, nothing fancy around the woman, and a habit pattern a kilometer long. He made his move, executed a clean heart shot (part of the contract), only to discover a day later that the director didn't die.
- Balladeer

I am aware of one specific target of the shedim that is likely making Bostonian lives quite interesting. The shedim have been after the work of Dr. Dyna Mite since she first announced her metaplanar gateway teleportation system. The process isn't important for here, just that Dr. Mite has an extensive metaplanar map that the shedim believe reveals a way back to their native plane, thus her gateways could somehow be used to access their metaplane. The problem is that Dr. Mite was lost when the NEMAQZ went up, and she hasn't been heard from since. She may have used her system to escape, slipped into hiding within the QZ, or, worst case, been killed.

- Let me correct worst case: Dr. Dyna Mite may have gone head case.
- Butch

The QZ is easy pickings for shedim—bodies everywhere. Between that, and others wandering around in bodies that aren't theirs, they fit in better than any normal person. Dr. Mite, and anyone else unlucky enough, is in for an unpleasant surprise when she learns the difference between head cases and shedim, and that what works against one does not work against the other.

While this is a seemingly mundane subject compared to magical items, sites of power, or metaplanar gateways, I should mention the shedim's interest in comets. Most seem to be looking for some connection to the path or make-up of Halley's Comet, possibly in hopes of using whatever arcane convergence played a part in their first escape to open another world-ripping portal. I'm hoping it's a dead end and their arrival had more to do with an escaping dragon spirit than a passing comet, but every avenue is worth investigating to stop and eliminate this problem.

IT'S NOT ALL BAD

I say that, then realize that two of the major players in the fight against the shedim are dragons. That whole street adage about not dealing with them makes even the good part bad. Oh, well, the lesser of two evils and all that. None of these major players is solely focused on the shedim, so don't expect their every job opportunity to be about the corpse-snatchers. Keep them on the radar for potential negotiation points during hiring.

In the dragon pool, we have Arleesh and Hestaby. Arleesh is all about keeping powerful artifacts away from people (and things) who could to use them to harm the existence of life on Earth. I don't limit that to dragons or metahumans, because most of the action she stops is connected to extinction-level frag-ups. Or at least death tolls numbering in the seven-to-ten figure range. She knows the shedim are alien, knows they don't care about continued life on this metaplane because they can live without it, knows they're seeking artifacts that she may or may not possess, and knows that they are a dangerous foe increasing its number of tricks on a daily basis.

- She deals square with runners. I know what the streets say, but Arleesh is a different cut of dracoform. She also tends to be quite up front with her expectations of success and failure and has little problem telling a team of runners they're likely not good enough for the job. It usually just digs at their ego and gets them to agree faster. As much as it's a negotiations ploy, it's also a warning, so take heed.
- Frosty

Now, stop pitying Hestaby because she's out of the dragon inner circle. All that is small potatoes in the big picture. She's still got a lot of connections, more mojo than most small corps, and access to plenty of resources. She's the closest thing to a friend that metahumans have in the dragon hierarchy (hence the reason she's on the outs), and if she's hiring a team to deal with something, she's usually going to give them the best intel she has. Since the shedim are posted up outside her former lair at Mt. Shasta, that gives her an additional vested interest in keeping them from causing trouble with the items and power she accumulated there.

Hestaby's efforts are heavily focused in this area, but she contracts operations all over the world because magic and mana are globally connected. She understands that to disrupt the pow-

er flowing toward her former lair, she may need to make a move in Russia, Colombia, Australia, or anywhere else. Not to mention that the shedim are globally connected, too. They're perfectly capable of communicating via the Matrix, something often forgotten with deeply arcane beings.

- Hestaby will play cards close to the vest if she doesn't trust a team. She usually works with runners who are already well-vetted, but on occasion she has to use unknown talent. Those times, she'll hold info back to prevent her intel getting sold by unscrupulous types. If she isn't telling you everything, it's because you're not in the in crowd yet.
- Frosty

- And happy to not be.
- Clockwork

And though we all firmly expect the dragons to take care of everything they put their minds to (haha), there are other, more metahuman groups that seek to eliminate this threat. Magical societies stand ready to hire and help when it comes to dealing with shedim plots and threats. The Dark Brotherhood and the Order of Saint Sylvester, also called the Sylvestrines, are both deep in the trenches of this war.

Though small in number in comparison to the threat, the Dark Brotherhood is focused on fighting this extraplanar menace. What they lack in numbers they make up for in efficiency with the surgical precision of their strikes. Members of the group claim they have never lost a Brother in battle against the shedim. That said, I know they've lost plenty of hired muscle, so be wary taking part in their efforts.

- Never lost a Brother? Are they sure? Because a body only needs to sit empty for a moment before a shedim can jump in.
- Plan 9

- Holy drek! That completely explains Marcus. He had a total personality shift one day. I thought CFD at first, but he's one hundred percent meat, no metal. When I did a little digging, I found he's a member of the Dark Brotherhood. They must have hit a group of shedim (I suggest calling said group a shamble, but I also lived through '62, still got nightmares) and he got snagged. Drek!
- Bull

If you need intel on shedim operations in an area, they're also a great source. They'll sell info and will usually give a warning if they think your work and theirs might conflict. If you ignore the warning, don't expect them to pull their punches or shift their plan to accommodate you. If they planned to level a building with explosives and you're still inside, they aren't going to hold off.

- The DB offer decent service trades for a lot of work. They've all got lives outside the society, so the variety of offered services can be pretty good. They also make great magical backup if you need it.
- Fianchetto

- A few years back, Sticks was down in New Orleans doing a bunch of work with the DB, building up favors. Used them to eventually call in several Brothers to assault a fledgling insect hive. Worked like a charm.
- Turbo Bunny

Though one might not think of a Catholic religious order as seeking to destroy extraplanar evils, the Sylvestrines took a focused interest after their ranks were infiltrated. They rooted out the problem, but not before it cost them reputation and resources they did not have. Now, they've shifted focus to prevent that from happening again and to get a little old-fashioned wrath-of-God vengeance on the shedim. Their usual modus operandi is to capture a single shedim, perform an exorcism, and then destroy the released spirit before it can find a new home. It's certainly not as flashy and grand as other groups, but there's a definite solemnity and surety to their methods. They usually add a ward to the space, which helps prevent the exorcised spirit from fleeing. Their banishing methods also seem to be some of the most effective—probably based on practice and protocol, but it could very well be something else.

Since so few people come to them of their own free will, the Sylvestrines are often operating in a less-than-legal fashion. That means the use of less-than-legal assistants in securing a location in a secluded part of town. The biggest problem with working with them is their view of sinners. Even though they vet the runners to avoid hiring murderers, they still treat runners like the scum on the bottoms of their shoes.

- Tempers get tested when working with these guys. I've heard of the most level-headed of runners getting snippy. If you've got a hothead on the team, keep him away from the church boys on the job. Bullets have flown, and not in the right direction.
- Fianchetto

There are larger arcane organizations, too—the Draco Foundation, Astral Space Preservation Society, and Atlantean Foundation are all putting effort toward the elimination of the shedim. Each has a variety of resources, but none seem to have the definitive answer to this evolving threat.

The Draco Foundation holds many of the artifacts that the shedim might want, and they know it. It isn't this target on their back that has them working against the shedim, though. Despite the fact the shedim didn't show up until after Big D was gone, word in the hallowed halls of the foundation is that he had already "seen" their coming and set plans in motion. They list the shedim as the single greatest threat to metahumankind at this time. Still.

As they have so many unique artifacts, they frequently use them as bait. A little slip of intel about something moving from secure site to secure site, and when the shipment gets hit, the shedim find themselves shambling into a trap. When artifacts really do get moved, the DF tries to keep the info tight, but we all know how that goes. Information is valuable and metahumans are greedy. Jobs to hit DF shipments are dangerous, and to make matters worse, you might be working for the shedim. I'm not a megacorp lover, but I'd work for any corp, any day, over working for the shedim.

- DF-related jobs, especially security details, often involve some unpleasant runner-on-runner action. Sec grunts know when to give up. Same can't be said for shadowrunners. It's why we have both legends and short lifespans!
- Stone

- Don't expect a lot of detail on your cargo, either. You can expect a warded box, orders not to check out the package, and, worst of all, the discovery that it's empty if you do. The DF has crews like Assets, Inc. if they need valuable cargo moved. Hiring a joe-schmo runner crew is more often a diversion than the real deal.
- Frosty

The Astral Space Preservation Society (ASPS) sees the shedim as an astral menace. They don't belong on this metaplane, yet they have found a way to anchor themselves here (in a most unpleasant fashion) to further their unknown ends. As a group that believes in balance and respect not only for our own astral space, but for all metaplanes, they have done little to intervene as the shedim invaded our plane. That said, they are also not the most direct of organizations. They aren't known for engaging in conflicts, on this or any other plane, and because of that they seem ill-equipped to deal with this threat. The shedim cannot be negotiated with, especially since we don't know what they truly value. The ASPS is primarily a source of data. They may be the most likely to find out where the shedim came from, and possibly a way to send them all back in one massive ritual shipment.

- We can hope, but unless Ghostwalker wants to open up about where he came from when he popped out of the rift, getting info on where they came from isn't likely.
- Slamm-0!

- So pessimistic! Ghostwalker just opened up a giant can of worms by declaring Denver all his, and he's going to need help—maybe so bad that he's willing to trade info for assistance, and the ASPS or DF could broker that kind of deal. Since he already played such a big part in closing the Rift, maybe he wants them all gone.
- Elijah

- Or we could talk to the man with whom Ghostwalker has conducted some metaplanar jaunts recently, see if he's found anything. Frosty, do you still have the clown on speed dial?
- Lyran

- Yeah, there was no way she was going to answer that.
- Bull

The Atlanteans are a different story. They don't have a connection to the shedim issue, and yet they are spending billions of nuyen to thwart them. I don't have a lot of connections inside, but I have a lot of peripheral contacts, and they make money hand-over-fist taking percentages of all the jobs the AF contracts to deal with shedim. From what they say, the focus is on containment and elimination. They make moves to push shedim into the open, or break up operations to get the smaller groups to close ranks with a larger one, usually under the control of a more powerful master. Once they've gotten a grasp on the shedim's location and logistics, they go in big and hard to hit them as a collective. Their Mystic Crusaders are said to be some of the best in the world at fighting the shedim.

- A text I once encountered while researching Atlantis for a potential archaeological dig had an interesting piece on something an awful lot like the shedim. They described its

spiritual form in a similar way and mentioned the dead walking. It was all related to a portal within the city that was always guarded, and the woeful tale of a guard who fell asleep at his post. I'm wondering if somewhere in the Atlantean roots of the organization, they have some connection to (and possibly responsibility for) the shedim.

- Lyran

RUMORED ACTIVITY

I've got a couple of pieces of reporting that fit best in a short section of stories and rumors that may or may not be shedim-related, though I lean toward the former (of course, or I wouldn't mention them). Both are things I haven't been able to dig into yet, and I have no problem if someone else wants to take the lead and work up some info for me. I'll pay if it's good.

First, some issues at a series of coffin clubs recently. The news reports talked about the warding on the clubs being broken, but no other apparent vandalism or illegal activity. It sounds like a great opportunity for a group of shedim to jump in and snag a lot of bodies from projecting magicians while they're off having a good time. Most of the revelers in these clubs push the limits of their astral visits anyway and wouldn't have time to do much more than flit around in panic searching for their body once they've discovered something has gone wrong. The news reports have come from clubs in Seattle, Miami, Houston, Atlanta, and DeeCee, and I've found similar events in St. Louis and Indianapolis that didn't make a major corp news site.

If these incidents are shedim-related, that's a lot of bodies, and that means something big is going on. Or they're actively upgrading from less pleasant host forms, but even that means they're about to kick off something bigger.

Rumor number two is coming from Matrix chatrooms dedicated to the macabre. Several posters have started talking about animals returning from the dead. I thought it was bulldrek, but something about a few of the posters intrigued me. I dug into several of the posts and then did some cross-referencing from other sources, including a few real meatworld people. Stories panned out and connected up, and I actually think there might be some kind of spirit, maybe shedim or related to shedim, that inhabits dead animals. It's usually house pets, from what I've read, but less domestic animals might just not make newsnets. No one really takes note of missing roadkill.

- I know at least one of the incidents she's taking about. Crazy old cat lady in Redmond came home one day to find all her cats dead. It was a gas leak or something. She was crazy and didn't take care of the bodies, but over the next several days the cats started coming back. After a week, they were all back.
- Sounder

- That wasn't the end of that story. The old lady died about a month later, and the cats have all gone wild. The neighborhood she was in had a new problem though: People were taking in stray cats and experiencing a sudden string of good luck— right before they died. This has to be feeding into something dark. If it's the shedim, there must be a master in the region using this for something huge.
- Bull

RULES INFORMATION

SHEDIM

First, check out their entry on p. 93, *Street Grimoire* if you haven't already.

Next, a few descriptive tidbits. The astral form of the shedim is similar to a spectral jellyfish. That form hides completely inside the physical form of its host shell unless using its Energy Drain ability, which looks like the jellyfish tentacles slipping out and pulsing with energy once in contact with the victim's aura.

Spotting a shedim with Assensing is a mixed bag. Seeing the actual spirit inside the host form is nearly impossible, but the host form looks like a gray ghost of a metahuman form on the astral. Penetrating the body to actually look at the shedim puts an astral viewer dangerously close, and the shedim will use Astral Combat to smack anyone sticking their astral peepers into its home. If the shedim has Aura Masking, they can use it on the shell.

Shedim are also not limited to the skill list provided. They can learn new skills and they aren't beyond using modern technology to defend themselves or find food. Firearms skills are common, and weapons are often loaded with gel or Stick-n-Shock rounds. Add to the horror and surprise your players with a little something different!

Street Grimoire mentioned an issue with the closure of the Watergate Rift. The shedim currently face a lack of connection to their home plane, so disrup-

tion of their spirit form is a death sentence. Whether it's because they're sent to their home metaplane and can't return, or because they just can't get sent to their metaplane and instead cease to exist, we don't know. It's a metaphysical question we won't linger on here, but it has shifted the mentality of every master shedim and many of the simpler monsters. Death is real, and whatever their goal here, they can't gain much ground once they're dead.

That means the methods of regular shedim are a little less hordes-of-walking-dead and more clusters-of-stalking-dead. Master shedim are all about manipulating the masses, as well as gathering together clusters of their lesser kin to educate, enhance, and control. To control their rate of loss, master shedim developed several rituals that grant the shedim a variety of other critter powers, creating shedim variants (described below).

But they still need to feed. Masters are fine with a little kidnapping and know how to cover their tracks, but the simpler shedim are not so bright, leaving clues and trails to their activities. Oh, the dangers of being the walking dead.

When fighting the shedim, the battle is two-fold. First, the spirit has to be severed from its host form. Then, the spirit must be destroyed/disrupted on the astral.

Severing a shedim from its host form occurs in one of two ways: kill the body or banish the spirit.

Let's talk body killing. First off, all shedim get the Physical Attribute adjustments for the metatype they inhabit. All damage inflicted on a shedim inhabiting a body goes to the body first. Even mana spells hit the physical shell and break it down before causing any damage to the actual spirit. Once the body is killed by successfully filling its Physical Condition monitor and Overflow (and a final Regeneration Test is made to make sure it's good and dead), the spirit is forced out of the shell and onto the Astral. Yay! You're halfway there!

Once you've popped that spectral jellyfish out of its shell, you're on to phase two. The first problem you're going to have is that the spirit is going to bolt. If it does, at least be happy it's gone. Some of them automatically pop off somewhere else, because master shedim are sick of losing soldiers and hit them with a few special rituals, but running is not always an option. Destroying a shedim on the astral is like destroying any spirit—astral combat, weapon foci, and mana spells. Once it's dead, it shrivels up and fades away.

Let's talk Banishing. First off, all shedim start with a number of services equal to their Force for banishing purposes. They don't have a summoner, so no bonus there. If Banishing is used to eject the shedim from its host form, you get a little bonus. The Banisher maintains a connection to the shedim and can make another Banishing Test on their next Action, even if the shedim has fled. If they're gone, it's a single test, so make it count!

Oh yeah, as for their purpose here on Earth, it's simple: Wipe out all forms of life. Why? Because they want to. Less competition, fewer things hunting them, total top of the food chain, and related benefits. But also because they like breaking things. Their methods are unpredictable, and a species with their lust for destruction is not comprehensible to most people. It's not part of our natural order, or a mental pattern we can seek to understand.

NEW CRITTER POWERS

These powers can be used on other critters or spirits as the gamemaster sees fit. For the shedim, each power is associated with a ritual spell (in parentheses) that the master shedim must use to infuse his subjects with power. They're added on top of the standard optional powers each shedim gets for each three points of Force.

ANCHORED RESIDENT (BIND TO ANCHOR)

This power allows a spirit to pop back to a designated object or location when it is disrupted on our plane, rather than going home. This saves the spirit from having to wait to return to our plane and in some cases (such as the subject of this chapter), it keeps them from being destroyed completely. If the anchor is an item, it can be moved, and while the spirit will still automatically return to it upon disruption, it might not want to if that object has been stuck in a ward or moved to another metaplane!

SHELL GAME (SLIPPERY SOUL)

Shedim with this power don't see any single form as their final destination. Instead they hop between available bodies—sometimes on a whim, but most often to escape. When they want to hop, or when their physical form is "killed," they can jump to another shell within Force x 100 meters, rather than being ejected to the astral plane.

Some "hoppers" hang out near graveyards and hospitals, or act as serial killers or morgue robbers with corpses stashed in their home turf for convenient hopping.

SUPERIOR BANISHING RESISTANCE (SOUL BINDING)

When you know that the end means getting banished instead of experiencing sweet release, you find ways to stop it. This power grants the spirit the ability to actively reconnect itself to the plane it's on. With a Simple Action, the spirit can perform a Magic + Edge Test, generating services to keep it bound to its current plane.

SUPERIOR REGENERATION (FORM REINFORCEMENT)

This power functions like the standard Regeneration (p. 400, *SR5*), with two exceptions.

First, the critter can make additional Regeneration Tests with a Simple Action on any of its Initiative Passes. It is limited to only one test per Initiative Pass, but it can make these tests whether conscious or not. These are in addition to the free test at the end of the Combat Turn.

Second, all damage can be healed no matter the source. Allergens in contact with the critter will still prevent tests, but that's it. This means these critters can take ridiculous amounts of damage, recover, and keep coming.

WOUNDED FURY (RAGING SOUL)

Critters are dangerous. Wounded critters are more dangerous. Wounded critters with this power are a nightmare. Wounded Fury grants the critter additional Initiative Dice equal to its current injury modifier with no maximum number of bonus dice. The bonus lasts for a number of Combat Turns equal to the critter's Essence. It then causes unresisted Stun Damage equal to the number of bonus dice until the damage fills the Stun Condition Monitor, at which point the critter collapses.

The critter recovers naturally and usually wakes in a calm state, but any other injury can set it off again. If the critter is not injured again, it no longer accrues damage and can recover naturally.

SPECIAL SHEDIM

BLADE-SUMMONED

The Dagger of Hivas Set is just one piece in a set of six daggers. Whoever currently has possession of each dagger (and why) is up to the gamemaster, but at least one is in the hands of a master shedim using it to summon more of their kind through ritual blood magic. The master shedim drives the blade into a living heart, killing the victim and using their life force to pull a single new shedim from their native metaplane. This shedim then possesses the victim's body, often acting as if the victim has come back to life.

The ritual takes a number of hours equal to the Force of the shedim being summoned. The ritual includes the Bind to Anchor ritual, and the Dagger of Hivas Set is the anchoring object.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDG	M
F+1	F+3	F+2	F+1	F	F	F	F	F	F/2	F

Physical Initiative	(F x 2) + 2 + 1D6
Astral Initiative	(F x 2) + 3D6
Movement	*
Condition Monitor	8 + ((F+1)/2)/8 + (F/2)
Limits	Physical (F x 4)/3 + 1, Mental (F x 4)/3, Social (F x 4)/3
Armor	**
Skills	Assensing, Astral Combat, Blades, Gymnastics, Perception, Running, Sneaking, Throwing Weapons, Unarmed Combat
Powers	Anchored Resident, Astral Form, Deathly Aura, Energy Drain (Karma, Touch range, Physical damage), Fear, Immunity (Age, Pathogens, Toxins), Paralyzing Touch, Possession (Dead or Abandoned Vessels), Sapience, Superior Regeneration, Wounded Fury
Optional Powers	Aura Masking, Banishing Resistance, Compulsion, Search, Shadow Cloak, Silence
Weaknesses	Allergy (Bronze, Severe), Allergy (Sunlight, Mild), Evanescence
Notes	*As metatype **As worn

HOPPERS

Never connected to any single form for long, the Hoppers jump from shell to shell to travel long distances, to save themselves, or just to mess with peoples' heads. They're dangerous because they need forms in range to hop into, and they have been known to create their own stores of hosts.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDG	M
[illegible]								F	F/2	F

Physical Initiative	(F x 2) + 6 + 1D6
Astral Initiative	(F x 2) + 3D6
Movement	*
Condition Monitor	8 + (F/2)/8 + (F/2)
Limits	Physical (F x 4)/3 + 1, Mental (F x 4)/3, Social (F x 4)/3
Armor	**
Skills	Assensing, Astral Combat, Con, Disguise, Impersonation, Perception, Sneaking, Throwing Weapons, Unarmed Combat
Powers	Astral Form, Energy Drain (Karma, Touch range, Physical damage), Fear, Immunity (Age, Pathogens, Toxins), Paralyzing Touch, Possession (Dead or Abandoned Vessels), Sapience, Shell Game
Optional Powers	Accident, Aura Masking, Banishing Resistance, Compulsion, Deathly Aura, Regeneration, Search, Shadow Cloak, Silence
Weaknesses	Allergy (Gold, Severe), Allergy (Sunlight, Mild), Evanescence
Notes	*As metatype **As worn

UNBREAKABLES

Masters love to keep a few of these close at hand in case of trouble. They can take a hit from a Panther XXL and keep on coming. They're great bodyguards but can also be used as an effective terror tool. A single skilled Unbreakable shedim can wreak havoc on a small town or equivalent area.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDG	M
F+3	F+1	F+1	F+3	F	F-1	F	F	F	F/2	F

Physical Initiative	(F x 2) + 1 + 1D6
Astral Initiative	(F x 2) + 3D6
Movement	*
Condition Monitor	8 + ((F+3)/2)/8 + (F/2)
Limits	Physical (F x 4)/3 + 2, Mental (F x 4)/3, Social (F x 4)/3
Armor	**
Skills	Assensing, Astral Combat, Clubs, Perception, Sneaking, Throwing Weapons, Unarmed Combat
Powers	Astral Form, Deathly Aura, Energy Drain (Karma, Touch range, Physical damage), Immunity (Age, Pathogens, Toxins), Paralyzing Touch, Possession (Dead or Abandoned Vessels), Sapience, Superior Regeneration, Wounded Fury
Optional Powers	Accident, Aura Masking, Banishing Resistance, Fear, Search, Shadow Cloak, Silence
Weaknesses	Allergy (Sunlight, Mild), Allergy (Wood, Severe), Evanescence
Notes	*As metatype **As worn

HORROR SHOWS

This is what happens when a master shedim learns all the rituals and has time to use them. Horror shows tend to be smarter than others of their kind. They will slowly sow fear into the local populace, allowing a master shedim to come in and use the background count to their advantage. They also tend to be the most likely shedim to break off from the rest of their kin and settle into an area just to scare the locals.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDG	M
F+1	F+3	F+2	F+1	F	F	F	F	F	F/2	F

Physical Initiative	(F x 2) +2 + 1D6
Astral Initiative	(F x 2) + 3D6
Movement	*
Condition Monitor	8 + ((F+1)/2)/8 + (F/2)
Limits	Physical (F x 4)/3 + 1, Mental (F x 4)/3, Social (F x 4)/3
Armor	**
Skills	Assensing, Astral Combat, Blades, Con, Disguise, Gymnastics, Impersonation, Perception, Running, Sneaking, Unarmed Combat
Powers	Anchored Resident, Astral Form, Aura Masking, Deathly Aura, Energy Drain (Karma, Touch range, Physical damage), Fear, Immunity (Age, Pathogens, Toxins), Paralyzing Touch, Possession (Dead or Abandoned Vessels), Sapience, Superior Banishing Resistance, Superior Regeneration, Wounded Fury
Optional Powers	Accident, Banishing Resistance, Compulsion, Search, Shadow Cloak, Silence
Weaknesses	Allergy (Sunlight, Mild), Evanescence
Notes	*As metatype **As worn

PAINT IT BLACKER

POSTED BY: SOMEONE SMART ENOUGH TO AVOID A BYLINE ON THIS

I don't want to rehash things we've already covered in terms of history, but for the kids out there who aren't keen on research, here's a link to a quick refresher on the Black Lodge <link>. So you know what's ahead, I'll be covering the results of some recent Black Lodge action before I move on to revealing members that I've uncovered. I've done a lot of digging, and I pull my info from a variety of sources, but I'm not hashing out every detail of my files. If you want those, hit the triumvirate with a PM to get hold of me. If I'm still around. I know that dropping this is bad for my health. I have a pretty fair idea of the size of the target on my back, so make the best use of this drop you can. It's not likely I'll be around to make another.

AN UPDATE ON THE STATUS QUO

THE BLACK CONGRESS

I'm not saying that JackPoint getting confirmation on all these members is what's caused their changes in status, but I'm sure it's led to more than a few runners taking jobs, playing it a little more cautious than usual, and coming out on the other end with a little more nuyen, while these seven UCAS politicians lost footing. Some lost a little, some a lot. For a few there were enough of those jobs that their footing was totally undermined, causing them to slip (or be removed) from their ebony towers.

I can clear up the current condition of three of them right off the bat. Former Representative **Samantha Payne** got expelled from the DeeCee Lodge and now operates under the jurisdiction of the UCAS State Department as an ambassador to the NAN. I'm sure that position offers plenty of opportunities to further Lodge goals, and she likely has a wider knowledge of fellow Black Lodge members than her peers. Representative **Thomas Lincoln** was assassinated back in '77. The Lodge was doing a little clean-up operation on a failed effort to control a pipeline for dragon reagents. Lincoln had been in charge of that, and rather than getting the Payne treatment and getting demoted, he was removed from play completely by his own people. Representative Samuel Ruthledge also caught a bullet. He then reappeared as **Samuel Rutlidge**, Executive VP of Developing Market Research with Universal OmniTech in Africa (you don't need a significant name change when moving to the other side of the world). He got the Payne treatment after he couldn't manage to maintain control of his constituents and lost a vote that couldn't be rigged back in his favor. It probably didn't help that he was a little gun shy after being revealed to JackPoint and didn't push the efforts of the Lodge forward to any great degree.

- Payne has had numerous attempts on her life and has an active contract on the Hidden Blades. Last rollover, the price went up again. Between her personal security and Super-Platinum DocWagon contract, it's hard to get her down, and harder to keep her there.
- Arete

While those three took big hits, the next three haven't completely been knocked from the graces of the Black Lodge, but their political and personal efforts have been hindered by an increased level of active and willing opposition. Runners operating in DeeCee often put a lot of cash into recording mods and gear so that they can keep track of all the activities they are involved in, in case they find themselves in one of those difficult positions as a loose end that needs to be tied off. In the cases of runners working against **Joseph Ellis**, former Speaker of the House, they've managed not only to pull him down from that

THE BLACK LODGE

It's all rumor and speculation, but everything fits into a pretty neat little package at the end. The Black Lodge, in some form or incarnation, has been around for centuries, if not millennia. They were around well before the return of magic, and every rumor states they have rituals that functioned even during the down-cycles of magic. They've touched and influenced every powerful group in history, and rather than falling when their puppets were taken down, they simply shifted their efforts or supported those who brought down the puppets. They've influenced the Templars, the Illuminati, the Third Reich, the Spanish Inquisition, the Vatican, the Persian Empire, the USSR, and hundreds of other powerful entities throughout their long history. If you want the evidence, dig—but don't expect to last long once they find out you're getting close. Just ask JFK.

They currently have members within every major government, megacorporation, and powerful society in the world. All in positions of influence, if not direct power, because they don't want to be the leaders. They want to be the power behind the throne.

As best as any outsider can tell, the group consists of just shy of ten thousand initiated members from all traditions and magical talents. Yes, I said ten thousand. They've got a cellular design, with each cell (which in their case is called a lodge) having seven members, where each member overlaps with one other cell. Six members are leaders of a lower-tier cell, while one member is linked to a higher tier. There are a total of five tiers. At the bottom is the Lodge of Nostradamus. These lodges operate on the most local level—usually a city, sometimes a local corp. Their members are usually freshly initiated and rise to about Grade 5 before pushing for the next tier. Above that is the Lodge of Rasputin. They operate over larger cities, small nations, and corps and subsidiaries of about A-level. These magi are at least Grade 3 initiates in the order, and they usually push up to at least Grade 7 before trying to move upward. Then you have the Lodge of Mordred, running things across a single major nation or AA or even, ghost forbid, one of the AAAs. Magic-wise they are at least Grade 6 initiates, but since this is a frequent stalling point for advancing up in tiers, members of this tier are sometimes initiated well into the double digits. Over them is the Lodge of Morgana, which has six lodges, one per inhabited continent. These members must be at least Grade 9 initiates, though most are in the double digits. This fourth tier is the end of the rise for any member who is not a fully capable magician, meaning that adepts, sorcerers, summoners, alchemists, etc. all stop their progress here. At the peak is the Lodge of Merlin, also referred to as the Black Council, led by the Penultimate Master, who, in essence, controls the world. The members of the Black Council are all double-digit Grade initiates, with the Penultimate Master demonstrating mastery of all known major metamagics along with a few known only to the Black Lodge.

- I'm going to assume the Black Lodge knows their basic vocabulary, which raises the question: If the person at the top is the Penultimate Master, who is the Ultimate Master?
- Mika

- Good question, and certainly one they would be happy to hear you ask. Some like to say the term is symbolic—your "ultimate master" is yourself and yourself only, and everyone, even the leader of the Lodge, needs to remember that. Others say that this simply follows the clear pattern of the Lodge, where another secret always waits in hiding, and there is always some hidden individual pulling the strings.
- Frosty

Based on this setup, you can see this puts seven members in the Lodge of Merlin, six of whom are leaders of a Lodge of Morgana, where there are six other members in each of the six lodges that are leaders of a Lodge of Mordred, and so on down the line. Math it out and you get 1,555 lodges and 9,331 members. The group has non-initiated members associated with the group who are not part of a lodge as they wait for a spot to become available, prove their worth, or simply act as a "mundane" liaison for the organization.

Initiation rituals often involve the first of many identity changes for members, as most hide the fact that they are Awakened and don't gain the ability to hide their aura until they have studied the deeper mysteries. Appearing mundane makes it easier to hide being part of a magical secret cabal, while also making a person less threatening to the world's mundies.

Members can come from every metatype except for elves. The Black Lodge has a long-standing hatred of elves. It's solely based on those with exceptionally long lifespans, but the Lodge tends to view all elves as guilty by association. They keep all elves at arm's length, because they can't tell who has an association with the ones they really hate. I have heard rumor of a dragon member, but that is one rumor I have come nowhere near to verifying, or even getting a good lead on.

position of power but also get him smeared by several other representatives and senators who were not keen on being pushed around based on the information he had on them. Similar information, along with contracts linking back to him involving the gathering of that information, cast a metaphorical oil slick that dropped him from the speakership during the last election cycle. His senatorial counterpart, **Jennifer Henry**, found herself in a similar position as she was pushed out of her majority leader role in order to focus on "personal issues." Those issues really involved her being caught on record talking about slipping a few hidden articles into a bill that passed. The proposed articles would have shifted jurisdictional laws around St. Louis, providing additional support for an Illinois run at supporting the cities' "Freedom" movement. There was a time when I wondered if Angela Colloton must be a secret member of the Black Lodge, since she and her VP were the only two people above a string of politicians, all members of the Black Lodge, who were in line for the presidency. If it wasn't for the fact that I know the Lodge prefers to run things from behind the curtain, this power stacking would have made me uncomfortable, worried that a coup was coming. Now, **Nathanial Sherman** is the only one still standing in that line. As the senate president pro tem, he's third behind the VP and speaker, but now that the speaker is not Ellis, it's less of an obstacle. Sherman's current focus is on UCASian isolationist policies. He's pushing for a back-step-and-stand-off policy with the NAN, a write-off of both Denver and Seattle, and, while not isolationist, a move to reunify the "American" nations. None of it is direct stuff—that's not their style—but the direction of their efforts and agenda are easily discernible from the shifts in international policy.

Lastly, I report failure. Failure on the part of the shadows to make even a dent or cause the slightest hiccup in the efforts and maneuvers of **Richard Franklin**, House Intelligence Committee Chairman. I shouldn't be surprised. Even after I started digging, if it weren't for the JackPoint file that names him, I would never have known he was Black Lodge. He's good at covering his tracks, pushes his efforts off onto underlings several levels of importance removed, and orchestrates everything like a master marionettist.

- Rumors have Franklin as the newest Penultimate Master. The position, with its access to intelligence communities and data, would be perfect.
- Winterhawk

- The rumors are close. The newest PM is called the Crusader, but that's not exactly Franklin. The position may be held by Franklin as far as I can tell, but the Crusader is actually a younger (easy to do, when Franklin is in his 70s) intelligence operative who works with Franklin. The twist: She's not Awakened. That means she can't officially join the ranks of the club, but she has enough dirt on members that the PM has her as a "consultant". Hit me on the private bandwidths for a name.
- Plan 10

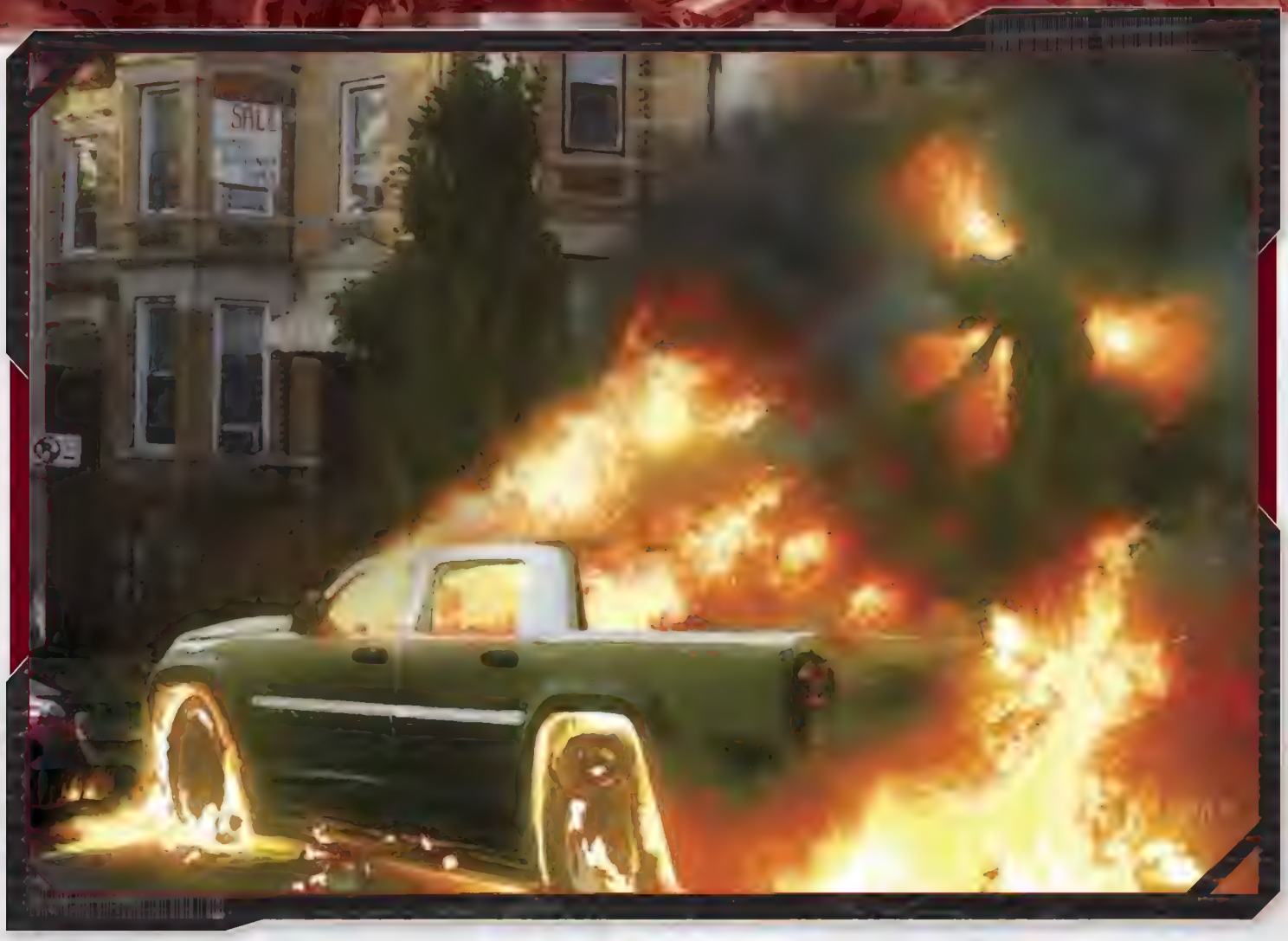
ARCANE FEUD

The ongoing battle for arcane supremacy between the Black Lodge and the Illuminates of the New Dawn (IOND) entered a new era of Cold War mentality in '76. After the Watergate incident, the IOND thought they had the Black Lodge on the ropes. Add in their efforts to shift the focus of the dragons during the Dragon Civil war toward the Black Lodge and identify members for the dragons to target, and you'd think the Illuminates were winning by leaps and bounds.

So did they. Or should I say, so *do* they. The IOND thinks that the Black Lodge is vastly weakened and no longer the threat that it once was due to the strain the Dragon War took on them. The belief is widely held within the IOND, and their efforts involving the Black Lodge have become more passive and reactive. There are a few who still harbor a deep worry about the Black Lodge, but for the most part, the IOND is focused on other arcane threats and endeavors.

Just the way the Black Lodge is directing them to.

During all the efforts to oust and identify Black Lodge members in other organizations, the Illuminates failed to keep up their own defenses against infiltration, which of course is a Black Lodge specialty. They don't slip in and go to war with Roslyn Hernandez for the top spot; instead, they insinuate themselves into a variety of influential positions and slowly shift the infographics and pie charts to show that the Black Lodge is losing ground and doesn't deserve to have the kind of attention it's getting, while other arcane threats like the Invae, shedim, and toxics are growing in power and need to be kept in check.



It was a brilliant move and a perfect example of Black Lodge operations. Slow and insidious. They don't jump to deal with any issue, but rather slowly work to manipulate and gain control through multiple avenues. Thus, the IOND can be added to the long list of organizations that the Black Lodge has worked their way into and manipulated for their own gain. As of right now, that gain has offered relief from the group's efforts against them, along with directing the IOND against the Black Lodge's current primary enemies.

While I didn't manage to get names, I know that the lodge that developed to infiltrate the IOND is referred to as the Dawnbreakers. I caught a few references to them in a series of encrypted emails I snagged off a courier's datalock that I was left with as payment after a run gone south. A bit of fortune. The messages are signed with pseudonyms, but they're a start for anyone interested in digging into who they are inside the IOND and possibly selling that data to Hernandez or one of her cronies. I bailed on my investigation after my Gopher mysteriously exploded.

NO MORE TÍRS

I'm a big fan of this effort, honestly. I don't have the same reasons as the Black Lodge but I'm no fan of the Tírs, especially the nÔg. The thing about the elven nations is that humans in positions of power are highly scrutinized and, despite their positions, they are still not truly respected in the same way as the elves that rule these places. Sure, Tír Tairngire has a dragon and a sasquatch, but their entire Council of Princes is a sham. The real power is hidden, and every person involved with that power has pointed ears and a shite attitude. What this means is that efforts made to try to destabilize the Tírs are not done from within their own government like most places, but rather from the outside

governments or through countercultural organizations inside the countries. You can guarantee that the IRA (Irish Republican Army) and NWM (North-West Militia) are both filled with marionettes dancing to the tune of the Black Lodge, alongside several of the NAN governments and societies.

What we can be sure of right now is that both Tírs still stand, but there is plenty of action going on inside the Salish-Shidhe Council, Pueblo Corporate Council, and California Free State to show that the Black Lodge has their pawns in the right places to push forward. Active violence isn't the style of the Black Lodge itself, but pushing others to violence is par for the course. With Hestaby out of Shasta, Northern California is a lot more volatile of late, and border flare-ups with the SSC and PCC have been increasingly common.

Political relations between Tír Tairngire and these three neighbors have been heating up over the past few years. All thanks to the efforts of the Black Lodge. As I'm sure I'll get a rash of folks comparing me to Plan 9, I'll put a trio of names out there: **Bryson Church**, **Owl Firebranch**, and **Jasper Southwind**. They're all Black Lodge. Church is a member of the Lodge of the Shattered Coast and leader of his Lodge of the Oaken Valley in CalFree; Firebranch is a member of the Lodge of the Weeping Bear and leader of his Lodge of the Ever-Green Sky in the SSC; and Southwind is a member of the Lodge of the Steel Totem and leader of his Lodge of the Folded Tribe in the PCC.

Church is also the the California Free State Director of Defense. Firebranch is a major in the Salish Rangers. Southwind is a PCC exec—the executive director of Correctional and Penal Services, to be exact. That's more than I'm comfortable sharing, but I can hope a few of you can get my back if this goes further south than I expect.

- That's a war hero in CalFree, a frontline border soldier in the SSC, and an executive with access to inmates in the PCC. I'm not a master manipulator, and I can easily see how these three alone could push the Tír and its neighbors into a war that wouldn't come out well for the elves, especially now that the NAN has an arcane megaweapon with Yosemite.
- Lyran

- And these are just individuals. If we look at the interconnectivity of the Black Lodge, they have thirty-nine other members that these three are connected to who could be playing a part in this endeavor.
- Snopes

LESSONS IN DRAGON FIGHTING

When the Dragon Civil War almost kicked off a worldwide war, the dragons spent some time pumping out the shadow ops to bring the fight to the Black Lodge. I'm happy to say their efforts were met with varying degrees of success. A few members who were specifically targeted by skilled professionals created openings in the Black Lodge ranks, but with nine thousand plus members, it didn't make much of an impact. However, it shattered several shadow teams who thought the contract on one guy was just too juicy to pass up, only to discover that very few members of the Black Lodge are just a single person. Every member capable of summoning and binding spirits has several on call, most have conjured an ally, and all of them are protected by powerful rituals and spells. They're tough slitches. Not to even mention that those teams were, in fact, making deals with dragons, and that shadow adage has a long and purposeful history. But that's not the real point here.

The real story here is what the Black Lodge did in retaliation. The Black Lodge is not some bumbling gathering of dark wizards all bent on world domination looking to spout out their plans to every would-be hero that comes along. They're a global secret society with nine thousand members in powerful positions around the world with no one around them aware that they're just marionettes in the Black Lodge's puppet show. When someone gets close, they get dead. No movie monologue, no "I would've gotten away with it if it weren't for you meddling runners," just a plain old "accidental" death. After the dragons' assault on their numbers—an effort that thinned out those who had slipped at hiding their affiliations—the Black Lodge did what the Black Lodge does best: bringing down their enemies with guile and misdirection.

The adult western dragon Fulconbord was killed in his penthouse lair in Los Angeles. The actor was supposedly the target of an anti-dragon organization known as Free Skies.

The adult feathered serpent Quetzanmin died in a terrorist bombing against a pro-metahuman rally in Tenochtitlan. The Aztlan authorities are blaming it on Humanidad Primero, a pro-human terrorist organization with ties to the Humanis Policlub.

The adult eastern dragon Qifeng was found dead, draped over the bridge of the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lampur. The event is still under

investigation, as no credible individuals took immediate responsibility, and the authorities who removed the body saw no sign of assault or attack. The investigation was pretty much stopped when Ryumyo showed up and claimed his fallen kin.

The drake Alis Tornwing was gunned down in front of the Cord Mutual skyraker on the streets of downtown Atlanta in what onlookers described as a gangland-style execution as several members of the meandering crowd pulled assault weapons out and nearly shredded her. She was able to partially transform and rise about three meters in the air before falling back to earth in a rain of pieces. The video footage is gruesome and somehow stayed totally focused on the drake while entirely missing the faces of the shooters.

The drake Felix Green was thrown from the top floor of the Cord Mutual skyraker and landed in the exact spot that Alis Tornwing had been gunned down. Not a coincidence.

The drake Kutesh Hassan was found six-point crucified in his drake form in the open-air lounge of the Burj Rafal hotel in Riyadh, a well-known Lofwyr asset (both the hotel and the drake). It was an elaborate arcane setup to maintain him in that form long enough to be seen but unable to be saved. Investigators said a series of anchored spells were used to stabilize him and then kill him once the right witnesses were present.

Every one of these deaths was the Black Lodge sending a simple message: Don't frag with us. They used organizations and local operatives in varying degrees, and no one will ever find a solid path back to any particular person, let alone a member of the Black Lodge. But it was them. It's their return volley on the dragons, and while none of the targets were great dragons, the stealth and precision with which they removed their lesser kin hints at the ability for a more direct assault to take down a larger foe.

The war between the dragons and the Black Lodge isn't over, not by a long shot. It's just getting more exciting.

- There was also an attack on Kalanyr in Redmond that's being pinned on elves from Tír Tairngire. It didn't kill him, but he left some serious destruction in his wake when escaping. Could this have been the Black Lodge?
- Sounder

- A group of elves connected to Shattered Promise, a group easily manipulated by the Black Lodge to go after Kalanyr in order to trigger potential retribution from the dragons against the Tír for letting their internal issues get external. Easily another aspect of the previously mentioned efforts to take down the Tír and the dragons all at the same time.
- Thorn

- These attacks have shocked the dragon community and put them on the defensive. Don't expect it to stay that way for long, and when the tide turns it will likely come as a flood of fire and blood.
- Frosty

- We are not shocked. The Black Lodge is full of despicable souls, but they are neither fools nor a weak foe. Though I still sit in exile, I know enough to understand that the rest of the dragons are biding their time and focusing assets on digging out members so that when their retribution comes, it comes with a swiftness and merciless fury that humankind has not seen in millennia.
- Orange Queen

- Tsk tsk. Usually the ones who feel a need to talk big are the ones worried about their ability to deliver. Just do the thing; don't talk us to death.
- Laughing Man

- Who gave them ... *&$%@#!^%& ... **connection severed** ...
- Bull

- That's better. Who's out there who wants to play in my games? I've got some jobs that need doing.
- Laughing Man

SEELIE ENDEAVORS

Just based on the efforts of a few members, I got a clear idea that the Black Lodge is not keen on the new connection to the Seelie Court. As one might expect based on the Court's magical nature, the Black Lodge has sent envoys there now that the link between the planes has become stable. It's a place of great arcane power, and that means the Black Lodge is going to want to gain control over it as soon as possible. Their normal techniques aren't likely to work at an acceptable rate for them and thus, they have been trying a different approach.

The very direct one.

Their initial forays appeared, on the surface, to be standard envoys, but every one of them included several extra individuals with a quite spe-

cific skillset. Their efforts were not an instant success, and a lot of runner teams that thought they could be the ones to get the big payday; instead, got toasted at the local pub. Gradually, the Black Lodge has gotten closer and closer to their desired target. If they manage to get hold of what they want, you can expect the next set of envoys sent to the Seelie Court will go with a different message: Stay away, or we will destroy your realm.

How? Because the Black Lodge is hunting for the Cornerstone. An artifact as old as the Court, an item that holds their home together. Their efforts are directed toward gaining possession of the Cornerstone so they can hold it over the Court and get them to stop involving themselves in our plane. It's brazen, but they're not the kind of people to act foolishly or waste their efforts on a fool's errand. They are going to find what they want unless others start working against their efforts directly. Which, they know quite well, is a rare thing in the Seelie Court.

Back home, they're pulling a lot of strings to gain control of the Yellowstone Caldera, and thus the source that is powering the bridge between the planes. The efforts are straining their influence in other areas of the NAN, but they have so many different members working different angles it's impossible to see and plan for them all.

- NAN rumors talk about a lot of arcane artifact smuggling coming toward Yellowstone. It's possible that if they can't get the Cornerstone and tell the Court to cut contact, they'll just overcharge the breach between worlds and cut off that path. Whether it will work or destroy the very fabric of reality, I don't know, but they know more about magic than I do, and they're willing to give it a shot.
- Turbo Bunny

- Is that confidence or desperation?
- Lyran

THE FACES OF EVIL

Having access to JackPoint has kept me up reading on a lot of late nights, and it's great to gather up some intel to update some previous pieces, but to this point really all I've done is update old news. I'd like to make a more meaningful contribution to show my gratitude for the work done here. In order to do that, I'd like to provide some new leads and new information on members of the Black Lodge. Short of walking up to them and asking "Are you a member of the Black Lodge?", I'm virtually certain every person I mention is a member of the Black Lodge. I'm not keen on putting bullseyes on the wrong targets, so if I name a name, expect they're a full member or they have enough strings tied to them that it's a place to look for the Lodge's dark dealings and machinations. I'll run though the national-level members I've pegged and then cover the megas and other organizations. It's vast. They're everywhere. And this doesn't even scratch the surface. Remember, there are nine thousand of these people. We won't even cover a single percent of their membership.

NAN

I mentioned Owl Firebranch and Jasper Southwind as part of the efforts to destabilize Tír Tairngire, but I've also identified a few other members of the Black Lodge within the NAN, several within the Sioux Nation, another in Tsimshian. They aren't all linked as far as I was able to tell, though I haven't focused on them much, and none appear to be in contact with Firebranch or Southwind either. This doesn't guarantee they aren't all colluding—the Black Lodge are expert at hiding their meetings and connections—but if they are, it's an effort for someone else to dig into.

SIOUX NATION

Mika's Cheyenne datadrop was a push for me to focus some attention in a pair of directions I hadn't looked yet. The pair of Arapaho Seats, those held by **Brilliant Sun** on the Council of Chiefs, and **Rowtag** on the Council of Elders, both got the finger pointed in their direction for a Black Lodge connection. It seems a smart move getting support for a similar agenda from members of the same tribe, though it seems an awful like like the old putting all your eggs in one basket as well. I haven't thoroughly sussed out their agenda, but I wouldn't point them out if I weren't sure of their nefarious nature. It may be primarily circumstantial, but my connections in the OMI have showed that each and every investigation into any allegations of a connection to Black Lodge or any other potential wrongdoing were halted or redirected early in the investigative process. Several of those investigations resulted in innocents being framed and convicted, but most ended in a bloody showdown that left more questions than answers and no leads to explore. They all obviously used deniable assets and left several levels of separation

between whoever wanted the initial contract and the fixer that made the street contacts.

What I have found about the efforts of these two in particular involves the Yellowstone Caldera, which the Sioux have extensive national security around. I've got no solid info on what they are planning to do with it, but I know these two are pushing to have a very specific set of individuals consistently in the vicinity of the Caldera. One of those individuals was the other member of the Black Lodge in the Sioux Nation I've managed to uncover, **Steven Swooping-Hawk**.

Swooping-Hawk is a local Wildcat Commander in charge of site access. He's a mystic adept following Grandfather Wolf, so at least he's obviously Awakened and not hiding it like members of UCAS Congress and thousands of other members hidden behind their supposed mundanity. He's pushing and pulling people into his command and into close proximity to the caldera for unknown reasons. Several of the individuals who get sent there have not been returning, and rumors are rampant that for each person who disappears, access to another metaplane is lost. If rumors are to be believed, Swooping-Hawk and the Black Lodge are using the power of the caldera to isolate our plane from the other metaplanes, not just the Seelie Court.

- It would explain much for the limits of my visions.
- Man-of-Many-Names

- Kind of a difficult game, though, since with most metaplanar openings, this would just be a game of whack-a-mole, where a new opening is generated when an old one closes. The stability of the Seelie connections is the exception, not the rule.
- Elijah

TSIMSHIAN

One of my personal favorites to look into, since it showed things do not always work exactly as the Black Lodge plans, was **Elston Waterborn**. As a Tsimshian tribal elder he had influence and power within the tribe and used that to further the Lodge's efforts during the MCT era. His efforts succeeded at shifting the power balance and allowing extensive damage to be inflicted by MCT's resource-stripping efforts. Although Waterborn was successful, the efforts cost him dearly. The corruption of Tsimshian was reflected within him. Somewhere in his efforts to subdue the local mana in order to limit the power of local shamans, he involved himself in a ritual that bound him, and his fellows, to the local manasphere, and when MCT wrecked the environment, the Black Lodge gained a toxic Seal shaman in their ranks.

Since the shift in power in Tsimshian, Waterborn has slipped from the heights of power into the depths of madness, but he hasn't lost his extensive connections with the Black Lodge. Pooling together with other toxics, Waterborn seized the port city of Ketchikan and caused a series of environmental disasters in the area between December and February of this past year. The efforts stayed out of the news. Between the Tsimshian and Salish-Shidhe governments not wanting to announce more environmental issues and MCT keeping a lid on any negative publicity coming out of their former dumping ground, the story was quashed.

- This place is a growing nightmare. The Black Lodge crazies who run the show are basically turning this place into their own little personal madhouse. Ketchikan is getting darker and darker by the day, with more and more summoned nightmares walking the streets. I didn't realize this was some kind of Black Lodge influence—I assumed it was another rift, similar to Denver.
- Sounder

- Not exactly the norm for Black Lodge influence, but I'm sure it's still furthering their goals, or the rest of them wouldn't have allowed it to go on this long.
- Lyran

- Who's to say this is being allowed? Maybe it's just too out of control to be stopped.
- Slamm-0!

- Riser mentioned Elijah Highwater in the *Hard Targets* drop. He didn't fare well once his name was out in the shadows. His apprentice, Alayna Evanstar, managed better but operates primarily around the metaplanar gateway near their offices in the PCC. She doesn't pander her manipulations on our plane, thus keeping her value as a target minimal, but her efforts make her a font of information for intelligence services tracking, spying, and attempting to work their way into her confidence to gain information on the Seelie Court.
- Snopes

- Yeah, Evanstar is one of the Black Lodge's best Seelie Court operators. She knows how to work the social system of the Court to her advantage and even manages not to completely ignore all the elves on the

Court, even though the Black Lodge hates them to the depths of their being.
- Frosty

UCAS

While efforts have been made to decrease the effectiveness of the Black Lodge in the UCAS Congress, the Black Lodge does not solely inhabit that body of politicians. Several other political authorities all around the UCAS are members as well. Direct connections between them are hard to find but possible. A lead I found in the *Dirty Tricks* datadrop guided me to another political figure that we've all heard of before. We'll run this along one step at a time.

In the earlier discussion, Proud UCASian mentioned **Maxwell Holtun** when discussing politics in North Missouri. He picked up the senatorial seat and added to the list of Black Lodge members in the UCAS Congress. It was an off-hand wacko Plan 9 comment that started it, but Snopes did some digging and made some connections between assassinations of some powerful political players and added notches on his gunbelt. I dug deeper and found connections between Holtun and **Everett Dunkirk**, the NeoNET Black Lodge member mentioned in *Hard Targets*, and then picked up another link that I'll clear up later. Holtun is one of the few "direct" members of the Black Lodge, who goes out and does the group's dirty work without the use of go-betweens.

- The gunbelt has three more notches since last I looked. One of them was added shortly after the death of Representative Lincoln in '77. Holtun could very well be the internal cleaner for the Black Lodge—their own grim reaper of sorts.
- Snopes

Investigations into the politics of Holtun had him involved in a lot of meetings with Governor **Anthony Presbitero** of Illinois. While Holtun kept his distance from St. Louis politics, he still had a lot of river and trade deals with Illinois that he needed Presbitero's graces for. North Missouri still doesn't have the political clout of Illinois (probably because Illinois has more than a century of corruption in its pocket). The meetings seemed completely normal, until they didn't. Curious about Presbitero's agenda in Chicago, and wondering if Holtun was trying to influence him in some way to favor the Black Lodge, I shifted focus and dug deeper. He's been mentioned before, and I figured someone would have dug deeper, but his connection to the shadows and truncated past brought me to the same road block anyone else would have found. So I worked more directly.

Presbitero is working to decrease, and possibly obliterate, the bug and shedim influence in the city of Chicago. He's gladly backed dozens of runs to pit the two arcane threats against each other. This is not a sign of him being part of the Black Lodge, just a sign that he had some arcane agenda.

His meeting schedule created the necessary circumstantial evidence and relationships to put him on the Black Lodge list. That, and the word of a dragon that has since gone missing. Presbitero's schedule has blocks of time he sets aside for astral meetings. Not limited by travel distance, they can occur nearly anywhere and were exceptionally difficult to trace and monitor, but with the help of a collection of bound assistants and several attempts I eventually got close enough to a meeting he was having with none other than Joseph Ellis and Jennifer Henry.

His agenda is obvious—Chicago for the Black Lodge—but his methods are not likely to be so direct, unless what I think about his nature is true. Based on some digging at his various homes, I think he has slipped south of toxic. He's a known follower of Raccoon, but the background count near his homes isn't all natural and pretty. Could be the city element of Raccoon, but I felt more slimy than city while I was there.

- That's if he really wants Chicago for the Black Lodge and isn't simply interested in undermining a power position of the bugs or shedim. Presibitero has happily built up Springfield and St. Louis as other Illinois power centers. He doesn't need the remains of Chicago. At this point, the city's survival is more based on nostalgia than need. It would be easier to relocate and rebuild power centers in the surrounding parts of the metroplex than to actually rebuild Chicago.
- Fianchetto

- PR for the megas. It's more important than nuyen to them sometimes.
- Glasswalker

- I wonder if the Hidden Blades bullseye on him has to do with the Black Lodge, Chicago politics, or him being toxic.
- Balladeer

- I wonder if there's a way to collect on all three!
- Kane

I haven't done all this without making enemies and having those enemies come after me. The problem with coming after me is that if you don't get me, I'm quite talented at back-tracking jobs. I'm a tad messy about it, so those I'm trailing back often know I'm on the trail and start cleaning up, but then they're at least focused on something besides coming after me. They're also hasty and sometimes make one of those mistakes that gets them too much attention from local authorities. That was the tale of **Corbin Houston**, mayor of Halifax and unlucky sap who got tapped to remove a troublesome investigator.

- Houston's clean as a whistle. And mundane! The worst thing in his past was a brief scandal about bribing the adoption system to get his twins moved faster out of a warzone in Africa. And this is all it takes for me to ignore everything this kook says.
- Arete

Backtrack up the chain from a runner team, to their fixer and Mr. Johnson, up to a campaign manager between gigs who got tasked with a simple job by a man who bore a striking resemblance to Houston. Luckily the clean-up hitter had the campaign manager as the target and not me, because whoever it was probably could have picked off me instead. I got a doozy of a mind probe dumpshock, but I made it out. I assumed the hitter had to have been paid from Houston's campaign somehow and dished a little cash to a hacker I know who dropped a little data into the Houston campaign system and an anonymous tip to the FBI. He had to focus on dealing with that and I got the hell out of Nova Scotia.

- Hey Arete, I dropped a line to a connection I have in the FBI in the northeast, and he confirmed a tip and a started investigation before it was dumped because the data was supposedly an obvious plant. Why are you so keen on discrediting the author?
- Glitch

CAS

Besides the presidency (which, if they took it, would defy their ideal of rule from behind the curtain), I don't think you can get a more individually powerful position than governor. In charge of an entire state and autonomous to a fair point, the governor's office has a lot of influence both down into their own state and up into the Federal government. It's not exactly behind the curtain, but it's also not out at the head of the nation getting scrutinized by powers at home and abroad. As you can likely guess, the next revelation exposes Georgia Governor **Jackson Davis**. With a classic Southern name, he slipped into office between feuding old hats back in '78. He hasn't been long in office, but he has been pushing several controversial agendas in his short time up top, including a mandatory registry for the Awakened entering the state of Georgia. The agenda is doomed to fail statewide, but the obvious desire is for the part about registration in Atlanta to stick, citing safety concerns in the capital after all the issues that DeeCee has had. This is by far one of the pushiest and most in-your-face efforts to gain control over magic in a region. It would seem out of place if the CAS were not such a hotbed of divisiveness between its people when it comes to whatever makes them different from one another.

- As you can guess, the Atlantean Foundation isn't keen on getting their Awakened employees tagged and registered, and while they can avoid that by staying on their own turf, the moment they step off corp property they're required to register themselves. You can start by looking at them as the funding behind any work against the governor's efforts in the near future.
- Lyran

- I don't think Davis is the Black Lodge member—well, at least not Jackson. Sara Lee Davis, his wife, has all the makings of being the power behind the throne. She's already a registered hermetic mage and proponent of the governor's agenda, and everything we know about her comes from information after the last Crash. Everything before has disappeared.
- Sunshine

Not every member of the Black Lodge can be a senator, governor, or representative, there are other positions of power that need to be controlled. **James Huntswell** is officially employed by the CAS State Department, but defining his role in the government beyond that is an effort in futility. While he does not wield any individual power, his position as a government ghost allows him to push others in whichever ways the Black Lodge needs. He also rarely actually goes by Huntswell, but his aliases all have a first name derivative of James or something with a J so that he can always go by "Jay," and his surname usually contains the word Hunt. He moves around a lot and seems to be a frequent go-between for various members

of the Black Lodge. His movements and connections seem to defy the standard limitations of contact between more than seven members among lodges, meaning the Black Lodge may have a bit more depth to their design than we are currently aware of.

- That makes some sense. A group that large would have a hard time operating with its cell-like style, but a few rovers who can communicate between larger numbers would keep everything more orderly. This guy would be a great target for info, though. Probably why he's a government ghost and not in a standard political position.
- Thorn

- I'm sure he is protected by ritual magic that will prevent him from talking.
- Lyran

- Probably make him explode if he talks.
- Slamm-0!

AMAZONIA

The Black Lodge does not limit their efforts to North America. The nation of Amazonia is magically powerful, and anywhere that is magically powerful is going to have the Black Lodge poking around trying to control that power. I'm sure there are probably dozens more in Amazonia, but all I managed to get sufficient evidence on was **Adalberto Falcao**. Falcao doesn't hold a fancy title—he's actually an administrative aide in Manaus, but his position offers access to the scads of information that rolls in from every corner of the country.

He gained my attention as an info broker in the country. I wasn't even looking his way until I put in a request to him about the Black Lodge, and he came back with a massive load of garbage. It was strange for such a respected info dealer to have so little, so I went back with my info to sell on some world members so that maybe he could develop his info from there. Then I had to dodge bullets at the payoff, and I decided to shift my attention to Adalberto. It paid off in terms of confirmation of the hit contract, and a little personal reconnaissance had him making some meetings that were certainly not government related.

AZTLAN

If there is one place the Black Lodge will actually be in danger of getting caught, it's Aztlan. With a religion that sees sacrifice as a norm, even a group like the Black Lodge might risk having someone who won't go far enough for power. That idea adds an extra level of terrifying to **Hector Ibanez**. Ibanez has a past connected firmly to the cartels, strong connections within the underground Catholic Church in Aztlan, and absolutely no moral limitations whatsoever. Cartel necktie, no problem; crucifixion, he knows the right place for the nails; public execution, the bloodier the better to send the right message. All of this in the name of Aztlan progress, but all of it furthering the efforts of the Black Lodge as they seek to keep the fear of blood magic in the nation of Aztlan alive against the PR machine of Aztechnology. It's not a glamorous political position, but it's a necessity within a nation that has mastered the arts of sacrifice magic and wields the most arcane power of any single nation in the world.

- I'd argue the Tírs have more mojo. Asamando and Azania as well. And probably Yakut. I don't think it's the Azzies on top.
- Arete

- Since I know our author is not going to pipe up to defend this assertion, I'll kindly do it for him. The Tírs both have an elitist magical tradition that keeps the everyday people from truly participating. Asamando has a lot of dual-natured citizens, but they don't have tons of actual magical talent. Azania would be a fair argument if they were larger, and the Yakut suffers the same issue as Asamando. Plus, none of these places have a national religion that fuels the power of their magic. And sacrifice magic at that.
- Lyran

LAGOS

We always picture the Black Lodge in fancy chantries and working in the most powerful skyraker offices and back rooms of the world. Lagos likes to go against the grain in every way possible, and that goes for the Black Lodge as well. In Lagos, the power shifts so often it's hard to hold a single position and still wield power from week to week. That's why the Black Lodge has placed **Burke**, a local fixer, in a central and, more importantly, neutral position in Lagos. He avoids taking sides and works to avoid being indebted to any single tribe or corporate power in the city, all by working every deal with a favor or marker in his direction. He doesn't deal in purely nuyen (or those strange animal coins) and instead allows every deal to work in slight favor of the other party, with a polite reminder of what they are getting. It keeps him in the favor of all while owing favors to none.

His position has been ideal for moving a variety of African artifacts into the hands of the Black Lodge. Enlightening the right individual or individuals on their presence and sometimes on potential movements without selling anyone out or making it seem like he's playing favorites, but he's always working a few deals on the sly with the local shadow community to get the artifact into the right hands once the dust has settled. It's a delicate game, and he's obviously good at playing it since he's been at it for a decade. Virtually everyone in Lagos knows Burke, and everyone respects him as a fixer, despite the fact that he's truly just playing all the forces against each other in order to alter their focus and weaken their forces for his true benefactors to gain the prizes they seek.

- Burke = Black Lodge. That's some serious danger. He's got his fingers in every pie in Lagos. Hundreds, if not thousands, of artifacts pass through that city, and Burke has access and info on almost every single one of them. Explains a lot of the power growth the Black Lodge may have seen in recent times.
- 2XL

CONGO TRIBAL LANDS

While Burke helps control artifacts moving around, it is **Ketoma**, a tribal elder and statesman within the Congo Tribal Lands, who appears to be pushing politics toward the interior. She has solid strings connected to the right puppets within the CTL and has more connections to the megacorps on the continent than one would expect from a tribal leader from the deep jungle. The masses believe her magic—she is a social adept, which helps her make connections and build relationships. The most important relationship she needs to build is the one with the Black Lodge. She desires for her people to be brought forward into the modern era but fears leaving their cultural roots behind. Her place in the Black Lodge is helping her make the connections to bring the modern world to her people, but through a group that "respects" their culture—that is to say, their higher-than-average magical talent rate. Her particular tribe is one-hundred-percent Awakened, with only those who have blood from other tribes mixed into their line risking being mundane.

- That's not a target for a mega or anything. Pure-breeding magic.
- Frosty
- Whatever mega decides they want it had better do a little digging first and realize whose toes they are about to step on. That's if forces within the corp don't already redirect their interests prior to an accidental altercation.
- Slamm-0!

RUSSIA

Jumping over to Asia, I point a stern finger at **Nikolai Volingrad**. Officially employed as a city planner in Vladivostok, his true occupation is more of an event coordinator between the government of Russia and the Vory v Zakone. He skirts both worlds while truly owing his allegiances to the Black Lodge. The bulk of his efforts are working to undermine any positive developments in the relationship between Russia and Yakut, mostly by supporting operations by the Amur Tigers with money from the Vory.

The contracts with the Tigers often involve some bonus potential if they can bring back specific targets. Sometimes it's objects, sometimes it's people or specific critters. The same contracts get handed over to shadow operators when they're important, and sometimes both at the same time. An important point when taking a contract to cross into Yakut for something. You might be taking Black Lodge work, and you might be running a race against a merc crew.

- Volingrad is well-known as a major force at working to undermine Yakut. Most people peg it as pride for Mother Russia, but I guess it's more an effort to destabilize an Awakened nation.
- Red Anya

JAPANESE IMPERIAL STATE

You would never think that a member of the Black Lodge would manage to get close to the Emperor, but that's because most people fall into two categories: those that don't believe in the Black Lodge, and those who underestimate them. **Keesu Sasori** is not a name you hear often but he is one of the closest advisors of Emperor Yasuhito. Usually referred to as the Gardener of Shadows, he functions as a counselor on topics best kept from the public eye, including the organization to which he owes his true allegiance.

I turned my attention on the shadowy force behind the throne after several operations in Neo-Tokyo that stank of Black Lodge influence. I dug up the chain of support through my usual less-than-polite means and found all the strings being pulled

directly by the Emperor's officiates. I had no illusions that the Emperor could be Black Lodge, but I kept a closer eye on who he met with and who attended various gatherings, eventually identifying everyone in his court except for one person: Sasori. A little focused digging, and Keesu Sasori was revealed as a skilled Wujen and personal advisor to the throne.

The name and position all came from a personal meeting at which I was quite thankful for the more civilized Japanese culture. Keesu was pleasant and happy to speak to another denizen of the shadows, and while I'm sure he knew who I was and my reputation with the Black Lodge, I got the feeling I was being treated like the ignorant child.

From what I can tell, the Black Lodge in Japan is trying to gain Imperial control over the majority of holy sites through legitimate means while shadow assets are being used to manipulate control over powerful arcane sites that are aligned to other religions and ideologies, in particular battling a growing insect issue in rural communities.

- The polite meeting could have been an interview. I'm sure our author is not without arcane prowess, and his "less-than-polite" references sound a lot like torture. He's no saint.
- Arete

- Sacred objects and artifacts from all over the JIS are getting funneled into Imperial control as well. Shadow and legitimate assets are regularly being put to task pulling these items from private collections, often from individuals who are not keen on giving them up. Even ones with Yakuza and megacorporate connections.
- Mihoshi Oni

INDIAN UNION

In a nation of over a billion people, you know there has to be at least one bad seb. Sure, there

are probably a lot more, but I had to high-tail it out of Mumbai once I confirmed **Ravish Junlupar** was a member of the Black Lodge, and actually one of the leaders of the Lodge of the Great Continent (that's a Lodge of Morgana in charge of Black Lodge activity in Asia). In the light of day, he works as a director in their national security office, a well-connected position. He's got so much clout I actually had to kill someone on an airplane from Mumbai to Neo-Tokyo, slip out of the airport in Japan, and pull in a favor from a Yakuza contact who owed me to get me a quiet spot on a freighter. I still got made at the Seattle docks and had to take drastic measures and run cross-country into the Chicago CZ to shake the hitters. Ravish demonstrated the reach of the Black Lodge perfectly.

At home, he's pulling strings all over his homeland and other nearby Asian nations. I didn't get info on any particular operations he's controlling, just a general sense of manipulating the arcane powers of the Indian Union. With the bug hives all over Mumbai, and several in other IU cities and dotting their countryside, I'm sure he's doing something against that force, but he also seems to be part of the effort to push several other magical societies to the fringes of IU society in hopes that social pressures remove them for good.

- The increase in security protocols and controls for access to the Ganges is coming straight from Junlupar's office. It's full of public-safety claims, but that screams red-tape shield.
- Baka Dabora

- So, we think the Black Lodge is trying to harness power from the Ganges ley line. That's a lot of mojo. What could they be using it for?
- Lyran

- So many crazy possibilities, but I'd lean toward something sooner rather than later. They can't hold a site like that for long before other powers gather and work together to push them out. Maybe the bugs? Maybe the dragons?
- Snopes

ARES

Despite the vastness and size of most of the megacorps, I've typically been limited to only a single member in each. While that seems strange, because we all know there are more, the issue comes in when you realize by the time I'm onto them, they're onto me and I've had to drop investigations fast. **Khelina Westerly** is a Project Coordinator for Ares in North America. She moves between a lot of offices as part of her job, so it makes a great cover for coordinating projects for the Black Lodge as well.

She gained my attention when I took a job with a team in Minneapolis. We were popping into an Ares subsidiary for some datafiles that the Johnson claimed was blackmail material his employer didn't want to come to light. The job went sideways when we found out the security force had been compromised by bugs, and then realized the whole subsidiary was a bug hive. Mr. Johnson played a double-cross on us, but part of the team slipped the noose and wanted a little revenge. They grabbed Mr. Johnson, but while they were bringing him back to me, I got a visit from Westerly.

She's a cold and confident woman who had very little issue bluntly telling me who she truly worked for. She then said that my efforts to seek out Mr. Johnson's employer would lead to her. The Black Lodge is operating all over the world trying to diminish the strength of the bugs, and Ares has quite an internal problem with them. She needed to confirm this subsidiary was indeed a hive before she could direct a Firewatch team. She claimed Mr. Johnson was solely responsible for the double-cross and paid the team to turn him over. I'm sure she was lying but we walked away with a little more cash on our credsticks, and I had another confirmation for my ever-growing list of Black Lodge dirtbags.

- I actually think the Black Lodge has put a lot of effort, and cash, into helping Ares deal with their internal bug issues. I'm sure none of it is above the table and Damien probably has only a hint of a clue about it because he doesn't want to be indebted to these guys. The thing is, they have a mutual enemy, and the Black Lodge loves using others to accomplish their own goals.
- Stone

- We seriously need Sticks back. These staggered drops just aren't enough info. We need that witty insight.
- Turbo Bunny

- Witty and Sticks in the same sentence. Funny!
- Slamm-0!

AZTECHNOLOGY

Aleya Gutierrez was listed as a mid-level executive wagemage for Aztechnology's office in Boston before the QZ popped up. She disappeared

for a short stint after the lockdown, but the corp claims she was never missing, but rather on assignment in Africa. Once she was back they slid her down to DeeCee. I first turned my eye toward her to see if she was a head case (frag calling them monads) while snatching patients for Butch. The grab team I was working with set up a tight little ambush on her regular transit route. We had planned for heavy Matrix resistance, but instead had a pair of spirits pop up alongside her pair of security goons to chew us up. Luckily the hackers we had covering us bricked her ride so we could bail, though her spirits pursued.

The intel we had pegged her as a middling wagemage with no blood magic links and not much natural potential. It was about as correct as the head case part. After the failed grab, I did some looking on the sly and found her movements and connections running parallel to several of the corrupted UCAS Congress members. They were arcane dead-dropping in DeeCee. The one message I managed to pinch a peek at mentioned a dagger in Aztechnology's possession with unique arcane abilities. No other details, but the message was definitely intended for the Black Lodge in Congress.

A little more recon and I could tell that Aleya was trying to set up a chance for her colleagues to grab the artifact. I'm not sure how it played out, because I had to get out of town once my cover was blown. I'm not welcome with the Lodge or UCAS federal authorities.

- AZT letting an artifact slip their grasp isn't an easy mistake to cover. Gutierrez will need a patsy to take the fall, or else she'll be on the altar at the next Sun Ceremony.
- Picador

EVO

I've always liked Evo as a corp. They're progressive. I despise them as an op target, because they are an internal menagerie. Everything is welcome in Evo, and I would almost believe they accepted **Koreli Ivatsu** while being fully aware that he was a member of the Black Lodge just to add to their eclectic mix of citizens. According to their company records, he isn't listed as affiliated with the Black Lodge; in fact, he's listed as mundane, a shadowman SURGE, an acquisitions manager for the Atlanta office, and at risk for making a move over to one of the trog corps in Sweetwater Creek because he's a troll.

His SURGE traits lead him to live a more nocturnal life, which is best for a troll in Atlanta, and works out great to visit secret meetings and work on furthering the Black Lodge's causes in the southern capitol along with efforts in and out of Evo.

Koreli moves a large number of items around for Evo and works deals to get resources the corp desires from organizations that are not immediately likely to sell what they have. He doesn't operate alone, and as we all know a job title like "acquisitions manager" means dealing with shadowrunners on a regular basis, but Ivatsu is more of a coordinator for his team of acquisition specialists. He doles out assignments and keeps them in the dark on where and who their procurements go to. A hacker friend did a little digging and found plenty of items that don't stay in Evo's coffers or have their retrieval efforts listed as failures when there are confirmations from teams on the street that they were successful.

- Vice, an Evo citizen and former runner we've mentioned before, has connections to Sweetwater and recently started putting out feelers and questions on Koreli. Vice is a Wise Warrior shaman, and a changeling, too. He's probably going to start contracting gigs to sniff around Ivatsu.
- Snopes

- Especially once he sees this. He's got JackPoint access.
- Bull

- Nice!
- /dev/grrl

HORIZON

And then there's **Judy Garland** of Horizon. Don't let the name fool you—she's not some dim starlet looking for more fame with the name. She's supposedly related—several greats and a grandchild make the connection—but with a pair of crashes and a lot of megacorporate censorship, tracking down that kind of proof is nearly impossible. In some strange ironic twist of fate, or just her twisted sense of humor, Garland is a follower of the Wiccan tradition. Yes, a witch. And since she's a part of the Black Lodge, I'd put her solidly in the wicked category.

She's using her spot in Horizon's Talent Acquisition Department to do recruiting for more than simstars and trog rockers. Side meetings and clandestine surveillance operations with arcane talents that couldn't perform their way out of a wet

soypaper bag fill her schedule in every city she visits. One in every ten might get a second look, but only one in a hundred might get a chance to join their ranks. Plenty of other groups in the know have Garland on their radar because the UCAS FBI makes an effort to flip her prospects. It never works, and it usually just gets someone who was a little greedy killed while their real top prospects move into the Black Lodge's ranks.

- Can I point out that the wet paper bag adage doesn't carry to soypaper. It doesn't get all flimsy when it's wet. Just saying.
- Slamm-0!

MITSUHAMA

The ranks of Mitsuhama and the Yakuza overlap at many points. **Tineki Akimono** is one of those, one that also connects to the Black Lodge. As a site inspector for any and all MCT extraterritorial facilities, he has abundant access within the megacorp. He uses his access to help assess sites valuable to the Yakuza and then feeds all of his intel back to the Black Lodge, including security schedules and procedures, Yak movements and connections, and the inventory of almost every location. The only places he doesn't get to assess are MCT's black sites, and for those the simple lack of access tells him enough about them.

I've never experienced him dipping his toes into the shadows, so there must be another member of his lodge that makes those moves for him.

- That's a dangerous trio to get in the center of, but playing the proper parts off each other could set a runner up for life and have all the blame being pinned on criminals, a secret organization, or the world's largest megacorporation. Dumb runners need not apply.
- Glitch

- It could definitely set them up for the fives minutes that are left of their life once they get noticed by any of these three megalodons.
- Sounder

NEONET (NEONOT)

Like a crashing star, NeoNET is still making quite a stir on the way out, and members of the Black Lodge inside the corp are looking for new digs. We saw a snippet on Everett Dunkirk before, and I used him as a point to watch, but all I managed to get was Dunkirk's moves as his contract was picked up by Maersk and his offices were moved to their St. Louis complex on the docks. I didn't catch any side operations helping him out or meetings to arrange his own landing place. Maersk just took the contract, and when I dug into their side the only name I managed to find attached to the move was **Royce Thigpen**. He's next on my investigation list, so he's not confirmed, but he certainly played a part in getting Everett a cozy new corporate home.

SAEDER-KRUPP

Keeping a secret like being a member of the Black Lodge from a Great Dragon is no feat to scoff at. **Karl Schuertz** has managed to keep his executive position at Saeder-Krupp while also reporting to his true masters in the Black Lodge for almost twenty years. He ruthlessly stamps out evidence of his allegiances and avoids involving himself in any efforts that are too overt. His lack of efforts have stagnated his rise but for him it is better to be Lodge-locked than dinner.

I only came to him through Evelyn Koenig, who made the mistake of keeping a rose handed to her on the street. The rose was bugged and I got a clear shot of Schuertz before he found the device. Evelyn turned up dead a few weeks later, probably after Karl got permission to kill another member of the Lodge.

- Release the info to Lofwyr. I'm sure he won't have any red tape to go through to remove Karl.
- Bull

- I can guarantee that Lofwyr would leave Schuertz in place if he found out. And the misinformation would flow like the rivers of the Danube.
- Thorn

SHIAWASE

Wanna know how you get someone in a very powerful family to be more loyal to your dark secret society than their own kin? Do what the Black Lodge did to **Suki Shiawase**. Get them young and disgruntled, embed them deeply in the benefits you are bringing to the world, and then let them bury themselves so deep in this life that there's no way out.

Not that Suki is even looking for one.

She's a family waif, living off her name and credentials all over the corp but making sure those who fall for her name join her long list of debtors, with dark deeds on their résumé they want to keep

hidden. If I had to guess, I'd say she's setting up something larger, and each one of these pawns isn't randomly selected but instead placed at the perfect point in her web. At some point, she will pull a final string and unleash her plan, and then likely slide up the Lodge order and garner a new identity.

- I was contacted in Sydney by a hotel manager who needed someone "checked out"" (his cute murder metaphor). He gave me the name, and I gave him the estimated cost. He didn't have the nuyen because the name was Suki Shiawase. And that was before I knew this angle.
- Fianchetto

WUXING

How it happens that every other geomancer in Wuxing doesn't notice what **Lu Wong** is up to is beyond my scope of imagination. He has to leave traces or make changes that are obviously not for the benefit of Wuxing, but for the past six years he has been in a position in Hong Kong to manipulate and shift the lines of power for the benefit of his parent corp, but also for his secret benefactors. The best I can tell is that he passes the knowledge to the Black Lodge, where members align their own power locations to be close to the Wuxing sites and funnel off a little mana for themselves. Wong is quiet about his allegiances everywhere except the BTL parlor that he frequents for his next strung-out lover.

- They don't need to funnel anything off. The lines in Hong Kong are wide, and sites across the sprawl can channel the massive amount of mana pumping through them. They would have to siphon off huge loads of mana before they approached a discernible flux in the mana level.
- Lei Kung

- The Eye of Twin Skies is an artifact known to siphon unimaginable amounts of mana from lines of power. It was last seen in Lagos, but the security detail on it was found shredded. Without the artifact, of course.
- Lyran

ORDO MAXIMUS

Nations and megacorps offer a lot of power options but not all of them, and the Black Lodge wants to control it all. That includes other secret societies, even ones supposedly run by a secret vampire cabal. **Bronson von Brauer** is deeply embedded within the Ordo Maximus and feeds scads of secrets on vampiric magic to the Black Lodge while also being in a position to pin Black Lodge actions on Ordo Maximus stooges.

I was trailing some of these rumors before I had to make some distance between myself and both these groups, but the stories said Bronson was stepping up his efforts beyond misdirection and into manipulation. His primary goal is getting the OM to focus their attentions on the remaining shedim in order to eliminate a threat. How it played out, I don't know. My sources in Britain say Bronson hasn't disappeared, but Parliament may be voting on new laws regarding shedim.

- It's a bloody mess. Whoever drafted the initial legislation included a long list of dual-natured threats, including ghouls and vampires. Luckily that means it's stalled in revisions.
- Hannibelle

HUMAN NATION

There are few things more horrifying than a psychopath. They can smile as they slit your throat and then go sit down for dinner with your mother and ask for seconds. That's **Ellie Versh**. She's an upstanding member of the Denver social community, including a respected position with the Humanis Policlub. Digging deeper reveals connections to the Human Nation, well known in the shadows for their efforts to rid the world of metahumans through a variety of disreputable but gloriously surreptitious ways. They don't promote boot-stomping violence; they prefer clinics that sterilize metahumans, or food additives that only affect metahumans. Well, mostly. But any human they affect must have had some bad genes, and their children could have been metahumans. Those are their words, not mine.

Versh is working through the Human Nation to eliminate metahumans in general but focusing on efforts to destabilize metahuman nations, in particular Tír Tairngire in North America, but her reach is global. Well, it was until Ghostwalker dropped the giant "get out" sign on Denver. It may be slowing her international plans, but I'm sure she's using her time of solitude to rethink her life choices and become a force for good ... oh wait, no, she's probably plotting a way to wipe out every meta in Denver and possibly bring down Ghostwalker to boot.

- The situation in the FRFZ isn't likely to be conducive to their efforts. Ghostwalker is seriously cleaning house. He wants Denver to be a truly different place from the rest of the world. And for good or ill, he's making it happen.
- Bull

ASPS (ASTRAL SPACE PRESERVATION SOCIETY)

I'm putting this in without thorough confirmation. **Tasha Ray** is a well-known metaplanar explorer who works for the ASPS. Her efforts have been documented in several legitimate publications, and nothing in her work would make her seem a member of the Black Lodge. Which is, of course, entirely normal for their members.

Then I did some metaplanar travel myself and discovered things were not politically stable on the planes she had visited, something she mentioned nothing about, and the residents blamed much of the instability on an outsider who happened to fit her description. I'm not sure what the point would be, but sowing instability in metaplanes would seem a great plan for the Black Lodge in order to gain control or deny others control of these places.

- Ray has a dark side for sure. I've come across her on the metaplanes before and she wasn't happy to have another "Primer"—that's what explorers call those of us from our plane—around while she did her work. Most of the places she goes on the up and up have a great opinion of her, but she goes a lot more places than just those.
- G-Nome

CHILDREN OF THE DRAGON

All too often people think of the Children of the Dragon as a quirky dragon-worshiping cult, but the group is a power to be reckoned with in terms of metahumans looking into and seeking draconic artifacts and secrets of draconic magic. **Trayger Vinkanter** may claim that the Big D came to him in a vision, but that vision probably occurred inside a Black Lodge chantry as they planned his infiltration.

Vinkanter leads a moderate sized sect based out of Gloucester, Massachusetts, a short distance northeast of the NEMAQZ, a.k.a. the (former) Boston Quarantine Zone. They got a boost of mentally unhealthy followers when the iridescent dragon graced Boston's skies, and Trayger has been using them to seek out and acquire artifacts of the dragons. While he orders others out into the world, he uses his connections to other Children sects to learn all he can about dragons and their magic. All of which he feeds back to the Black Lodge.

CLOSING AND ONE CLOSE TO HOME

As a final note, I'd like to point something out. If you look back, you'll see thirty-nine names (forty-one if you count the dead ones) that I've tagged as members of this secret society. If every one of them is connected to a separate lodge, that's a total of four hundred sixty-eight members of this organization we could bring down if we broke every one of them to roll on the twelve other members they know (HAHAHA). That leaves 8,863 members still out there. Anyone out there wondering why I didn't put my name at the top of this ... I'm looking at you, Arete.

- And I see you, (deleted by SysOp). Two can play at this game. Let's see who's got more powerful friends.
- Arete

- (User Arete / Subscription Terminated) Well, I guess I understand his earlier desire to debunk our author.
- Glitch

- This guy just makes an accusation and Arete is gone? Who the frag is this guy?!
- Balladeer

- There was a small attachment that opened for the three of us that had the data. It's not just his word.
- Glitch

- Anyone who caught that name before I deleted it, keep it professional and forget what you saw. I'm not sure whether to be terrified or feel complimented that we had a member of the Black Lodge in our midst. Guess we're kinda important.
- Slamm-0!

- Anyone interested, there may or may not be another contract opened over onThe Hidden Blades with a familiar dossier attached. For those who were his friends, keep it civil here and check out this <file> that the author linked for private viewing.
- Bull

MONADS AND CFD

SCARRED MINDS AND CRUMBLING TOWERS

POSTED BY: MILES LANIER

What a long, strange trip it's been. Five years ago, strange events led me to believe that I was losing my mind, and I contacted Mr. MacCallister—more support for my theory—offering to trade what I knew for access to this community. I'm pleased to say that the risk paid off. This posting will, I hope, tie up the loose threads that my first contribution unraveled.

First, the good news: The tide is turning against CFD.

- Thank fucking Ghost.
- Butch

However, as a wise man once said: "The most dangerous time in any operation is when everything is coming together." The battle against CFD is far from won, and as you'll see, gaining the momentum won't necessarily make it any easier. I've compiled as much information as I can about both our current best efforts to combat the disorder and a few questions that have yet to be answered.

On a related note, I'm sure most of you are aware by now that NeoNET has left the ranks of the AAAs, and Richard Villiers has been replaced by Johnny Spinrad as the playboy of the Big Ten. The details I've been able to collect on that are also included in this file.

UNFRAGGING THE CLUSTER

The revelation of the truth behind the Boston lockdown sent shockwaves around the world. Evo's and NeoNET's share prices plummeted as public opinion turned against them. When the lockdown's true cause came out, the UCAS government announced that it would take the perpetrators to the Corporate Court as fast as it could assemble a case.

For the second time in as many decades, the Corporate Court Crisis Coordination Committee stepped in to manage the disaster. As a show of good faith, Celedyr gave C5 the schematics for his Overwriter nanites and their programming goo, which were immediately put to use in the relief efforts.

- Good faith? From a dragon? You can't be serious.
- Frosty

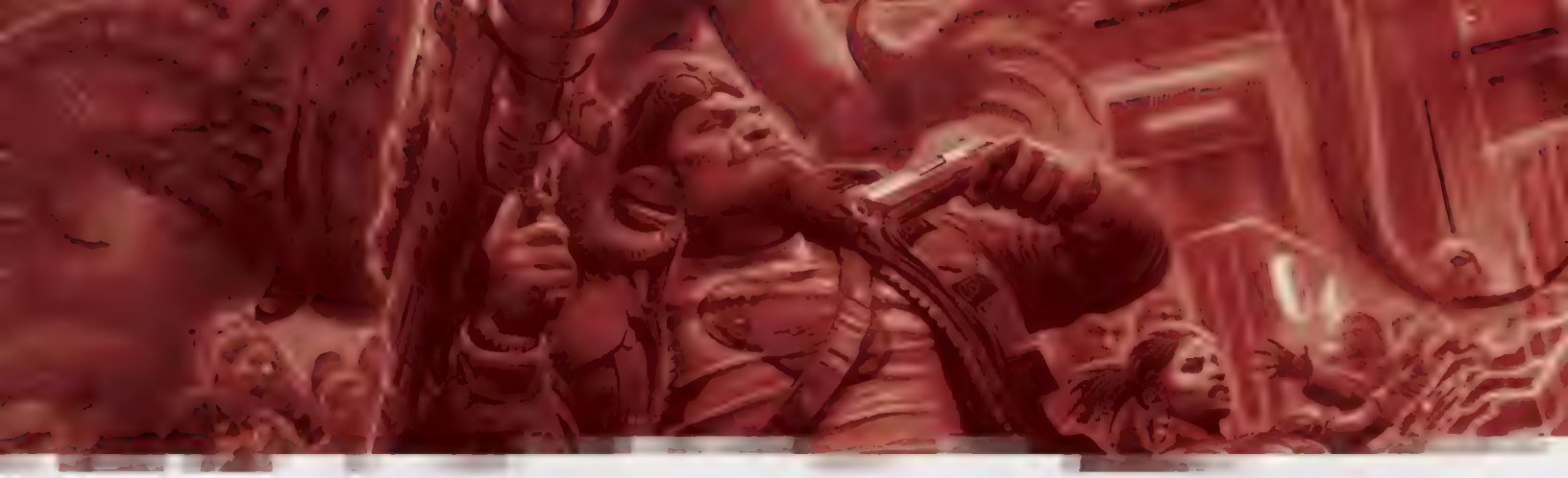
- Our kind are not completely lacking in conscience, and Script-Diver is no fool; he knows that trying to avoid responsibility for this debacle would do him more harm than good. After the events of recent years, I suspect he is not feeling lucky.
- Orange Queen

- Nice to see that even the greats aren't above the "get out in front of it" approach.
- Kay St. Irregular

Almost overnight, corporate-run clinics sprang up in BRA signatory nations around the world, offering free CFD screenings and treatment to anyone who could prove their identity.

- Which, as usual, means no SINless need apply—and if you can afford a fake SIN good enough to fool GOD, you can afford the "confidentiality surcharge" at a private clinic that offers the treatments for a fee, instead of risking contact with people who work for a living.
- Chainmaker

- Hey, it's not their fault that people in certain circles think the masses are a disease worse than CFD. Luckily for the rest of us, a lot of those people won't even go to the



private clinics to avoid starting rumors that they have CFD. Makes for great blackmail material.
- Kat o' NineTales

- Note that Lanier said, "BRA signatory nations"—as in, not in the NAN, despite the original outbreak being in the PCC. I'd bet nuyen that the Big Ten are trying to use that clause as leverage to get the NAN to grant them extraterritoriality.
- Mika

- It also means anyone who's willing to move CFD treatments into the NAN can make some pretty sweet cred. Sometimes, the border patrols will even let you go when they realize what you're carrying.
- Turbo Bunny

As usual, petty megacorporate squabbles filtered into the relief efforts. Not wanting to lose more money than they already had, Shiawase insisted on using the treatment it had developed—the much-reviled NanoScrub, or as one wit called it, "NaNope"—citing a lack of trust in any "cure" developed by NeoNET. The rest of the Japanacorps followed suit.

- They might've gotten NanoScrub rolled out, but after his near-complete failure to capture Evo's lost share of the bio-augmentation market, Kazuja Shiawase is still on thin ice with the rest of the family. The only reason he still has a job is that Shiawase Biotech managed to reduce NanoScrub's rate of side effects from ten percent to less than one percent, which I've heard was less about research than it was about stopping whoever was behind the shadow interference in the project.
- Baka Dabora

- Probably another victim of the ongoing Coltrane-Kiyomoto rivalry. The only question is whether one of Kazuja's rivals used the MFID itself to sabotage Kazuja's efforts, or just had them stand back while runners did the job instead.
- Kay St. Irregular

The UCAS government filed lawsuits in the Corporate Court against NeoNET, Evo, and Aztechnology in late 2078. The verdicts in the cases against NeoNET were handed down throughout the second half of 2079; I'll cover those in more detail later. And finally, Deep Space Exploration and Colonization I departed from Gagarin Station just last week, which has already had a huge effect on the Monads remaining on Earth—and is the subject of the next section.

ON THE DEFENSIVE

When the truth about CFD first came out, metahumanity's views on head cases were split between hate and pity. Some argued that they were victims who only did what was necessary to escape their torturers, the way any metahuman would. Others refused to forget that these digital invaders had erased loved ones who had nothing to do with the corps' misdeeds. If nobody could bring back the people they'd lost, revenge was the next best thing.

The head cases found each other and organized into Monads, then lost what little sympathy they had gained when DSECI launched last week. Reports that the departed Monads' hosts were left catatonic aboard Gagarin Station set off a firestorm of negative publicity.

- I know a lot of people are still upset about Gagarin, but I'll leave this here in the hope that people will read after they've had a chance to cool off. The Monads at Gagarin and on DSECI were the ones who asked the Space Rescue Service to stand by during the launch, and they made sure there weren't active Monads who might accidentally retransmit CFD in the area while the SRS was ferrying the hosts back groundside. As far as I know, they all made it back alive, too.
- Plan 9

Estimates of how many Monads actually departed with DSECI vary wildly, as the Corporate Court has kept the number of "returned" bodies found aboard Gagarin Station strictly classified.

- The CC did, but the Space Rescue Service has been a little more lax—emphasis on *little*, but I can confirm that the number of people recovered went into the thousands. I'll pass on any more data I find, but with how closely everyone's connected up here, I try to keep my nose out of SRS business.
- Orbital DK

With DSECI's departure, earthbound Monads are busy figuring out their next steps. They certainly have no shortage of problems to face.

MATTERS OF LAW

The backlash resulting from Evo's acceptance of the Monads has made both national governments and megacorporate leaders hesitant to do the same. The Monads have little motivation to go anywhere else, though; receptions from other corps have ranged from cool to downright hostile, and while many North American governments are offering citizenship to both Monads and AIs, none of them have laws in place to prevent anti-Monad prejudice. In fact, certain countries have just the opposite—early in 2079, the Confederation of American States brought its first Monad test case to court on charges of involuntary manslaughter. I've attached a video clip from the trial here [link], along with a transcript of the meaty part.

GEORGIA SUPERIOR COURT: PEOPLE V. L. O. PANE

[Clip excerpted from State of Georgia vs. L. O. Pane, Judge M.J. Weatherby presiding.]

ASST. DISTRICT ATTORNEY JELLICOE: Mr. PANE, you said that when you were formulating your escape plan from your alleged torture—

DEFENDANT PANE: Alleged? It happened.

ADA JELLICOE: —at NeoNET's hands, you decided your best chance lay in, as you described it, "writing yourself to an external organic storage medium"—or in other words, into the brain of a metahuman, is that correct?

PANE: Yes.

ADA JELLICOE: And that one of the reasons for doing so was that metahuman brains are functionally similar to the digital storage media you previously occupied?

PANE: Yes.

ADA JELLICOE: Mr. Pane, I assume someone of your ... background is very familiar with the mechanics of data storage. When someone attempts to write data to a medium where data is already stored, what happens?

PANE: The application will ask the user to confirm whether they would like to overwrite the existing data.

ADA JELLICOE: And if the user consents, the existing data is overwritten by the new data?

PANE: Yes.

ADA JELLICOE: What happens to the old data at that point?

PANE: It's erased.

ADA JELLICOE: Can the data that's been erased be recovered?

PANE: Sometimes.

ADA JELLICOE: But not always.

PANE: No.

ADA JELLICOE: And if the data can't be recovered, is it still functional?

PANE: Not usually.

ADA JELLICOE: Mr. Pane, when you decided to "write" yourself to the victim's brain, were you aware of the possibility that any existing data there would be overwritten as a result?

PAME: Yes.

ADA JELLICOE: And that any data overwritten as a result of your "transfer" was potentially unrecoverable?

PANE: (nervously) Yes.

ADA JELLICOE: And you chose to do so anyway.

PANE: (long pause)

ADA JELLICOE: Mr. Pane?

PANE: (shifting in his chair) I ... invoke my Fifth Amendment right to protection from self-incrimination.

ADA JELLICOE: Your Honor?

JUDGE WEATHERBY: Mr. Pane, you waived that right when you agreed to testify. Please answer the question.

PANE: (sighs) Yes.

ADA JELLICOE: You chose to write yourself into a metahuman brain, despite knowing that any data already contained therein—that is, the thoughts, feelings, and memories of the person who already possessed that body—would be overwritten and might be permanently lost.

PANE: (angrily) We never intended to do this kind of damage!

ADA JELLICOE: But you knew it was possible.

PANE: (long pause)

ADA JELLICOE: Mist-

PANE: (frustrated, resigned) Yes, we knew it was possible.

ADA JELLICOE: Nothing further, Your Honor.

The Georgia Superior Court found the defendant guilty of involuntary manslaughter. He's appealing his verdict with the help of the well-known legal firm Schmidt, Jakob & Lei, but at this point his prospects are anyone's guess. Nobody has tried to present a "secondary cerebral revision" case yet, but if Pane's case is anything to go by, I suspect the CAS will charge any Monad defendant with first-degree murder.

- The knowledge of the Monads' origins being so widespread actually helps them here. So many people having anti-Monad sentiments makes it difficult for the courts to find an unbiased jury—any perceived prejudice can get a potential juror disqualified.
- Kay St. Irregular

- But what if people agreed to let a Monad move in?
- Plan 9

- If honoring the contract would require one or both parties to break the law, the contract is considered unenforceable—consenting to an illegal act doesn't make it legal. The courts take a lot of heat over that principle, though, especially from libertarians. They don't like the idea that someone could be jailed for things like patient-requested euthanasia or consensual rough sex.
- DangerSensei

Needless to say, this position is very unpopular among both Monads and civil-rights advocates, who claim that interpreting CFD transmission as assault or murder effectively criminalizes being a Monad. CAS lawmakers have responded that CFD transmission isn't protected by CAS metahuman rights laws. The pro-Monad activists naturally rejected that argument and have begun pursuing legal action.

- All of the "primary cerebral revision" cases we're aware of were NeoNET citizens, and those events happened outside the CAS. How can a court in Georgia even charge them?
- Icarus

- The principle of universal jurisdiction has existed for over a century, starting with the Nuremburg Trials after the Second World War. Normally it's reserved for crimes against metahumanity and the like, but the CAS' "tough on Monads" stance led the CAS Congress to pass a law claiming universal jurisdiction over CFD-related crimes. That law's constitutionality hasn't been reviewed by the CAS Supreme Court, but I suspect this case will change that. And the corps, of course, will weigh in when they can determine how money will best flow.
- Fianchetto

TROUBLE IN PARADISE

I had planned to include information on each of the Big Ten's Monad-related activities in this section, but it turns out that for any corp besides Evo and Saeder-Krupp, the answer is "not much." On top of that, S-K's counterintelligence apparatus is as skilled as ever, my queries were blocked so thoroughly that even if that information *does* exist, I'm not sure whether anyone outside S-K would be able to access it.

- If it makes you feel any better, Mr. Lanier, my former comrades in S-K Prime weren't any more forthcoming. I've tried to learn more on a few occasions since the *Market Panic* download, with no success. I don't know whether that means Lofwyr is keeping the Monads under even tighter security than before, or that he's decided they're no longer useful and disposed of them.
- Heisenberg

On the other hand, Evo's Monad-related issues are wide-ranging. They may have captured the lion's share of the market with Monad-developed technologies, but Evo may yet find that the price for openly accepting Monads into the corp was too high.

Evo was the first of the Big Ten to offer sanctuary to Monads. Corporate emphasis on diversity aside, everyone knew the Russian mega was using the Monads' scientific brilliance to recoup some of their financial losses. Mere weeks after opening their doors to the Monads, Evo was besieged by shadowrunners looking for paydata on the miracle tech the Monads were surely helping them develop.

- Just curious, did anyone besides Planners *not* take a run against Evo in the past couple years?
- Slamm-0!

MONAD MIRACLE TECH (FOR GAMEMASTERS)

Like we've mentioned in previous books, we've stayed away from releasing details of Evo's Monad-driven discoveries because we believe individual gamemasters will be better judges of whether and how well they'd fit into their campaigns. As far as the Shadowrun metaplot goes, the DSECI launch is the point where Evo can't keep their discoveries secret anymore. Enough details of their work have leaked out for other parties to begin developing their own versions of the new tech.

How this affects your campaign is up to you, of course. See the most recent write-up of Evo (p. 86, *Market Panic*) for suggestions about technologies you might want to include into your own corner of Shadowrun. If you've decided to use these new-fangled Monad contraptions in your campaign, we suggest you consider how far they're likely to spread.

Which of the Big Ten have enough paydata to start developing their own Monad-derived tech? Which of them *think* they have enough paydata, and what will happen if they're wrong? How will the players getting hold of this stuff affect your campaign? The answers to these questions might lead to an entire campaign.

- Yeah, that's what I thought.
- Slamm-0!

Despite more shadow interference than any other single megacorp has seen in a similar period of time, Evo kept their more sensitive trade secrets hidden long enough to be the first to market with their Monad-designed augmentations. The results were so successful that even after the origins of CFD became public, Evo enjoyed a slight increase in their market share.

As the DSECI launch grew closer, though, more and more of the Monad researchers left the corporate labs for Gagarin Station. The ones who remained were already working beyond normal metahuman capacity, which resulted in a lot of grumbling from the Monads when the corporate leadership made it clear that they expected productivity levels to remain high despite the loss of so many staff.

- So you're telling me the Monads wanted to go to a corp where people accepted them, then they started complaining because they're being treated the same way every other corp drone is?
- Red
- I have it on good authority that that demand came from Ysil. The tension had been there since before she was appointed CEO, but the naga cultural disdain toward technology and the non-Awakened opened the fissures wider. The factions that had supported the Monad Cynthia Bills and the AI Taylor Dacopral for the CEO spot have become an informal bloc that's trying to influence policy in a pro-AI/Monad direction. Last I heard, the Monads were talking amongst themselves about protesting their working conditions by forming a labor union.
- Plan 9

- A union full of machines in metahuman bodies that replaced regular metahuman workers? That's just ... as a Wobbly, I don't know whether to laugh or cry.
- Chainmaker

Time will tell whether Evo can keep its product-development edge without the majority of their Monad researchers, but that isn't the only potential disaster Evo has to watch out for, as the inter-corp conflict with NeoNET continues to play out. Ironically, Evo may end up suffering almost as much harm from the Corporate Court's decision in the NeoNET case as NeoNET themselves did. Even though the Court is holding all of the CFD-related trials in-camera, the UCAS government convinced them to make the full record of the trial available to the public, including all of the evidence that NeoNET presented to try to shift the blame to Evo. I expect Evo's reputation to suffer further as more of that evidence comes into the public eye.

BOSTON

After a few months of C5-led relief efforts, the situation in the NEMA began to stabilize. Supply drops into the QZ became more regular. Corporate security forces began air operations to soften up the worst-hit areas of the sprawl, with mixed results.

- With the near-total Matrix embargo in the QZ, the corpsec goons weren't subtle about it, either. I found a report in a Knight Errant host describing how victims of the Lockdown strain were drawn to active Matrix transmitters. Someone suggested mounting a repeater unit on a helicopter or t-bird and flying low enough to draw the head cases out, then hosing the area down with Gatling guns and rocket fire.
- Slamm-0!

- Part of me is sickened by that, but I have to admit, it would be effective.
- Picador

When the damages from the Corporate Court's NeoNET ruling were finally awarded to the NEMA government, the slow process of reconstruction began. C5 directed the initial efforts on the ground, first securing NeoNET Towers as a staging area. Corpsec forces led by Knight Errant pushed through the Hub to link up with units moving east from Route 128.

The least-affected areas of the city were pacified relatively quickly, but the lockdown is still in place around worst-hit zones. The MIT&T cordon is still in place, and probably will be for the foreseeable future. South of the river, C5 and the corpsec forces have managed to narrow the Hub Containment Zone to between BU and Northeastern, and are pushing hard to clear the Fenway so they can focus on hitting MIT&T from all sides.

- Good, then they can rebuild Fenway Park!
- Slamm-0!

- I took an astral jaunt over to MIT&T and regretted it the instant I got there. The DIMR and Manadyne have already started preparing to clean up the astral space once the head cases are out, but they're going to have a bloody awful time of it, and it's going to get worse before it gets better. I've heard whispers that some of their magicians are trying to get in early and are hiring teams to babysit while they discreetly try to limit any further damage.
- Winterhawk

With the head cases contained, the biggest threat to people on the ground are the gangs and the Knights of the Red Branch. As soon as word of the NeoNET ruling came down, the KRB and their Bane-Sidhe allies jumped at the chance to thin the Ancients' numbers before the corps wouldn't let them run wild anymore, and the Centurions and the Roxx stepped up their turf war over Roxbury.

- It seems the KRB didn't get the message last time we crossed paths. I may have to pay them another visit.
- Thorn

Mayor O'Rylan's been too busy trying to organize the reconstruction efforts to press Knight Errant to step up their patrols, and even if she wasn't, KE's heavy hitters are all tied up dealing with the head cases. So, the gangs are making hay while the sun is shining, and it'll be interesting to see whether they remember to run when the head cases are gone and all the AAAs' corpsec is sitting on their doorstep.

One notable absence from Boston is the newest member of the Big Ten. Spinrad Global's American VP, Katie Brookes, has repeatedly said the corp is reviewing its options for a move into the Hub, but nobody's heard anything that sounds like actual movement. Personally, I think she'd rather just stay in Manhattan until the place doesn't look like an urban brawl arena anymore.

Everywhere else, Boston is still Boston. Two catastrophes in fifteen years have left the city and its people more than a little weary, but for now, it looks like the worst is over. Enough areas have been cleared of head cases that the corps are reopening their offices. They haven't taken the walls down yet, but the NEMA government is starting to let a few carefully screened people into and out of the QZ. In a few months, things might even be within shouting distance of normal. At least, as normal as a city can be with a big hole where its main economic engine used to be.

- Smugglers who can figure out reliable ways over the wall (or as reliable as things like that get, anyway) still have the chance to make some really good cred. Now that the corps have had time to clear out some of the head cases, word's getting around that Boston's safe enough to move people or cargo through, and they haven't loosened the cordon enough to account for the increased demand.
- Traveler Jones

REPAIRING A FRACTURED MIRROR

And now, the answer we've been looking for since this all began. I won't bury the lead: in some cases, yes, it's now possible to reverse the effects of CFD. All of the existing treatments carry their own risks, but I can say from experience that for people unwillingly infected by CFD, any risk is better than the alternative. Fortunately, researchers have made enough progress in finding ways to counter CFD that it's no longer a matter of simply going down fighting.

- Don't we normally get this stuff from the science side of JackPoint?
- Sunshine

- Lanier contacted me about this section, but I decided it wouldn't kill him to write it himself. He knows more about the scientific angle than you'd expect, probably thanks to his own search for a cure. The info in here has my stamp of approval.
- Butch

There key component to treating CFD is removing or "unmounting" the CFD personality fragment from the metahuman host, by either destroying the nanites the Monad is using as a physical platform, or transferring the Monad out of the host, similar to an AI.

LIGHTS IN THE TUNNEL

At present, there are four CFD treatments that I feel are reliable enough to recommend them. The most widely available means of countering CFD infection nanites is the Overwriter nanites supplied to corporate-run free clinics. Overwriters are hard nanites that work the same way as traditional hunter-killer nanites, but they are wireless-disabled and thus immune to being reprogrammed by CFD. If the infectee's nanite level is low enough, Overwriters can reverse the infection entirely, and early intervention usually prevents permanent damage to the host.

Overwriters are administered by IV injection, and you should be aware that they provide no sedation themselves. I strongly recommend restraining the Monad during the treatment—no small task in itself, between the risk of infection and most Monads' abnormally high strength and resilience.

- On the bright side, that "abnormally high strength and resilience" doesn't seem to apply to stunbolts.
- Lyran

- I did a trial run to see if Overwriters could be administered via aerosol like other hard nanites, and the results were pretty unimpressive—the spray disperses them a lot, enough to make it easier for the CFD nanites to isolate and destroy them. Unless you can trap the Monad in a room full of Overwriter nanosmoke or something (and good luck finding nanosmoke anymore), stick with the IV.
- Butch

- The corps have also been using Overwriters as a frontline treatment for potential CFD exposure. I've seen a few internal corporate reports showing that they work as intended. I'm guessing that means either that the Overwriters are as effective as NeoNET claimed, or the corps are even more paranoid about CFD than the rest of the world and none of the wageslaves were infected in the first place
- The Smiling Bandit

The other anti-nanite solution is Shiawase Biotech's much-maligned NanoScrub. Compared to Overwriter nanites, NanoScrub is more versatile—particularly in Monads with a large degree of nanite infestation—but works much slower, requiring the Monad be restrained for hours rather than minutes. Like the Overwriters, NanoScrub is administered by IV and doesn't provide any sedation on its own.

- Be careful with NanoScrub if the host has any cyberware. Shiawase did their best to make sure it wouldn't affect other augmentations, but there have been a few cases of people's 'ware melting along with the nanites.
- Baka Dabora

Physical CFD treatments can be extremely dangerous to the host thanks to the Monads' ability to control the hosts' vital functions. You might remember the recording from the *Stolen Souls* download, where the captured Monad uses the host as a hostage by stopping their heart. I've personally seen other Monads do the same thing several times since.

- Yeah, but with a good medkit you can start it back up easily enough. Now, when the Monad's still playing heart attack ping-pong and you're almost out of epinephrine, *that's* when it gets dicey.
- Butch

In contrast to the "hardware" approach taken by Overwriters and NanoScrub, others have developed "software" methods for countering CFD. The first of these is to face the personality fragment on its own turf via direct connection through the host's datajack or a set of trodes. This approach still requires the Monad to be physically restrained, but has the advantage of protecting the host from any attempt by the Monad to use their life as a bargaining chip. Once the Monad is secure, the rest of the procedure is (from what I'm told) a fairly straightforward Matrix battle.

- Straightforward, maybe, but not easy. I've heard about some of these after the fact, and every decker and technomancer I've talked to says they were surprised that

they won—and you know how much we hate showing any doubts about our skills.

- /dev/grrl

- I'll add my own experience to that. I got into a scrap like this recently, and I can honestly say it was one of the hardest fights I've had since the Crash. The worst part was that even after we beat the bastard, all those nanites being bricked right next to the host's brain pretty much lobotomized them anyway.
- Glitch

- I've had one of these encounters myself, but the Monad's code was corrupted beyond repair before the nanites had a chance to overload. It reminded me of what happens when an AI is disrupted, but without being able to leave its nanoswarm for the rest of the Matrix. I doubt the Monad in question survived.
- Puck

In the same vein as the Coriolis complex form presented in the *Chrome Flesh* download, a group of technomancers in the NEMA have been working on a means of removing CFD personality fragments. My efforts to track them down have failed so far, but I found the name of one of their associates, who I hope will comment here to explain their work.

- Not naming names doesn't help when everyone knows who I am. Anyway, this all started with Coriolis—I sent Patient V and his group a copy of it, and got in contact with Respec to see if she'd give us a hand, since she wrote the original version. After a lot of effort and a bunch of us going through Submersion, we came up with a new technique the Boston group calls "Defrag." I won't even try to explain exactly how it works, but I can tell you that it works equally well on Monads and AIs.
- Netcat

- Defrag? Drek, that brings back memories.
- Bull

- Actually, hon—Netcat, not Bull—I meant to tell you something about that. I was experimenting with some changes to my deck, and the logs from our little joyride the other day said everything was running even more solid than usual. Besides meaning my code was already perfect, I figured you'd want to know.
- Slamm-0!

FORLORN HOPES

Besides the four treatments I've already described, there are a few others that seem plausible, but not reliable enough for me to recommend them in good conscience. One of these methods fights fire with fire. It uses a purpose-built AI to contain and suppress any other CFD personality fragment within the host's mind. The host can then interact with the personality fragments without any fear of losing control of themselves in the process.

I can vouch for this software's effectiveness personally. I wish I could tell you more, but the origins of this AI are a complete mystery to me; the file simply appeared on my commlink without so much as a new-message notification. All I can tell you is that it works, and whoever wrote it has a strange preoccupation with the color grey.

- An associate from Lambeth had the same thing happen. Came down with a sudden case of split personalities—I wrote her off as mental until I got wise to CFD, then saw about getting her some help. Butch dropped in to visit, and a bit later, my acquaintance stopped losing her head. I tried to suss out what happened, but all she'd say was that she'd had a chin-wag with some grey bloke with no face.
- Chainmaker

- Wait, a grey icon with no face? Miles, do you still have a copy of that file? I think I know who sent it.
- Bull

- Uploading it to you privately now.
- Miles Lanier

- Yeah, I'd recognize that coding style anywhere. You and Chainmaker's "associate" both got a visit from FastJack.
- Bull

- It's also worth mentioning that some of the Monads who went up to Gagarin decided to come back to Earth instead of leaving with DSECI. I haven't spoken to any of them myself, but mutual acquaintances tell me they tried to get the Gagarin staff to upload them to the Matrix instead of DSECI's servers, and Aether wouldn't have it. If a technomancer who could release them from their host offered them the chance to leave willingly, or some other means of getting them out of the host's brain, they'd probably take it.
- Plan 10

After the CFD personality is unmounted, those who suffered partial overwrites regain control of their minds. Any lingering side effects can usually be treated by existing medical technologies. Most fully overwritten infectees, though, become catatonic if the CFD personality is removed.

- The cases Butch and I have seen are very similar to people whose personalities have been wiped out by overusing personasofts. (Actually, I guess it's not all that different in principle.)
- Riot

The most successful solution so far uses a personafix made from the survivor's personality to help them re-learn how to be themselves, the same way a person might re-learn to walk after a spinal cord injury. Early tests have shown promising results, but use is limited by the fact that most people don't have full-simsense recordings of themselves to create the personafix.

- Yes, I'm going to say it: The Resonance never forgets. Full-simsense recordings of someone may not be all that common, but everyone who's used DNI (that is, everyone but the five people in the world who still press commlink buttons with their thumbs) has a record of their brain activity floating around the Mind Realms. Those work just as well as a simsense recording—well enough that most of the calls I get from Johnsons lately are about Resonance Dives to dig them up. If someone asks you, see if you can get hourly rates, because the search isn't easy.
- Netcat

Not surprisingly, the syndicates seem to have found a way to exploit this treatment for profit. As the rumor goes, Mitsuhama uses their stable of captive technomancers to retrieve CFD victims' original personalities from the Resonance Realms. Combined with the Yakuza's bunraku technology, the custom personafix allows the victim's family and friends to reunite with their lost loved one—for a time, at least.

Normally I'm loath to include sensational rumors in my reports without verifying them, but this one has appeared often enough and with enough consistent details that I suspect it's true.

- Bulldrek. Pure, total bulldrek. No technomancer would ever do something that horrible, and *especially* not for MCT.
- Netcat

- Go ahead, keep thinking your little friends are better than me. I'll wait for them to prove you wrong. People are people, which means some of them—lots of them—are going to suck.
- Clockwork

- Assuming this is true, they have to be storing those persona templates somewhere. Finding and recovering them would be one hell of a datasteal.
- Pistons

Finally, Evo claims to have developed the tech necessary to write those neural patterns directly into the survivor's brain, and the number of people left behind on Gagarin suggests they're telling the truth. Very few people seem to be willing to take them up on their offer, though, for obvious reasons.

- Are people really so ruled by their emotions that they'd rather continue living with unwanted CFD than trust one of the creators of the problem to fix it?
- Plan 10

- Yes.
- Hard Exit

LOOSE THREADS

The nano-pocalypse seems to have been averted, but it would be premature to say CFD and the Monads are gone. The situation has simply transformed from CFD as a whole into individual Monads. They may be allies, employers, or enemies, but in many ways, they are becoming acclimated to life in the Sixth World, living just like other people.

- Except most people can't overwrite other people's brains. It's those subtle differences that matter.
- Hard Exit

There is one exception to that, however. It seems Eliohann saw my comment in the *Market Panic* file, because shortly after posting it, I received a message from "Neurosis," a warning that a threat from the past would return. I've been investigating and verifying the evidence Eliohann included since I received it, with the help of one of JackPoint's members, in the hopes that it was yet another hoax. Unfortunately, it wasn't.

I'm sure most of you already know the background behind Project Vulcan. Needless to say, it succeeded—but it very nearly didn't, or at least, not in the way Celedyr intended. Another digital intelligence besides Cerberus tried to take over Eliohann's body during the encoding process. NeoNET's internal investigation later found that the digital intelligence's profile matched a known AI, and that the code to create the backdoor was provided by Dr. Penelope Ann Xavier. Traces of the same code were later found in a small but significant number of CFD infectees inside the Boston QZ, and C5 investigators reported a similarity between it and code fragments found in the Renraku Arcology servers in 2061.

- Oh frag.
- Slamm-0!

I asked some trusted associates to review my evidence in the hopes that I'd made a mistake, but all of them confirmed it: The AI writing itself into those CFD infectees was Deus.

- Oh fragfragfragfragfragfragfragfragfragfragfrag– **<user disconnected: Slamm-0!>**

- Did Slamm-0! just brick himself?
- Kat o' NineTales

- Pretty sure he wasn't the only one.
- Pistons

- I suspect someone will ask me this eventually, so I'll just answer now: No, I don't know what Deus is planning. I was the JackPointer who helped Lanier investigate Eliohann's claims, because I want to see Deus and Pax stopped as much as anyone. (Don't bother with the usual wave of "bulldrek" posts; I know you don't believe me, and I couldn't care less.)
- Puck

- And Lanier just took your word for it?
- Glitch

- We've both been in this business too long to take anything for granted, Glitch. During our conversations, Puck was held inside a Faraday cage—at his own suggestion, I might add—and subjected to a mind probe from ... let's call him a former NeoNET executive. Suffice it to say, if Puck had intended to feed us bad intel, we would have known.
- Miles Lanier

- Speaking of loose threads, a technomancer contact in Boston told me about a few people he met who were ... honestly, I don't know what to call them. My contact said they were fellow technomancers he knew personally, who didn't show any signs of CFD infection, but had some awfully Monad-like abilities. When I tried to get more information from him, he got dumped mid-convo; a mutual friend told me later that he'd been bagged by a corp.
- Netcat

- I knew it. I fucking knew it. The AIs are possessing their techno-freak pets and using them to turn everyone into head cases. None of you believed me before, and now–
<user muted by sysop>
- Clockwork

- I don't know whether you're Clockwork or Plan 10 spoofing Clockwork's account, but behave yourself.
- Glitch

- And as if Boston didn't have enough crazy drek going on already, last time I went over the wall, I saw a corpsec unit made up entirely of orks and trolls. Typical, right? Except that if the rumors are true, every single one of them is a Monad. Personally, I'm not getting close enough to find out.
- 2XL

- I'm fine, everyone, the rugrat just spilled his drink on my deck. So Butch, now that you've saved the world from CFD, what are you going to do with all that free time?
- Slamm-0!

- Sleep like the fucking dead. Good night, folks.
- Butch

THE FATE OF A GIANT

To quote the classics, NeoNET has passed on. It is no more, has ceased to be, has expired and gone to ... well, you know.

- I wasn't expecting Lanier to be fond of twentieth-century British comedy.
- Winterhawk

- Nobody expects it.
- Miles Lanier

When the truth came out about CFD and the Boston lockdown, it was inevitable that the UCAS government would take NeoNET to task. The verdict was decided long before the trial had begun, of course, but neither the UCAS nor the Corporate Court was going to miss an opportunity to polish their public image when the blame fell squarely on one of their own.

To nobody's surprise, the Corporate Court found in favor of the UCAS, and NeoNET was ordered to establish a disaster relief fund totaling in the hundreds of billions of nuyen. Naturally, the corporation had expected that outcome since the trial began and had already been busy downsizing, restructuring, and selling off whatever assets they could. At first, it looked like NeoNET might have weathered the storm, until the Court delivered the second half of its decision. I'll let Justice Belczyk's words speak for themselves. [link]

- Holy drek.
- Mr. Bonds

- Could someone translate that to non-lawyer?
- Lyran

- It means that for the first time since ... drek, almost before I was born, there won't be a triple-A mega with Villiers running the show.
- Bull

- It's not just that. JRJ is at least an A-rated corp in itself. Villiers is the sole owner, but he can't be a director or the CEO with the ban in place. If voting shares are his only means of controlling JRJ, whoever Villiers appoints in his stead could sell JRJ out from under him before he has a chance to stop them. The Corporate Court might've just taken away Villiers' Golden Ticket.
- Mr. Bonds

Of course, Richard Villiers wouldn't be Richard Villiers if he didn't have a plan. From what I'm told, the first thing he did after leaving the courtroom was to walk into a private lounge, where Johnny Spinrad and a team of lawyers happened to be waiting. By the time they left,

Spinrad Global was poised to become the newest member of the Big Ten, NeoNET would only barely outlive its debts, and Richard Villiers had made another tidy profit from one of his many schemes.

- Wait, how can Villiers just transfer NeoNET's AAA membership to Spinrad? Doesn't he have to sell it, or have the Corporate Court vote on it, or something?
- Picador

- It's legal hair-splitting. The short version is that the guaranteed Corporate Court seat—the "Golden Ticket"—belongs to JRJ International, which Villiers owns. Villiers simply "leases" the rights to the Court seat like a landlord renting out an apartment. The CC couldn't force Villiers to sell JRJ, but they could force him to give up control of it, so Villiers turned around and rented the apartment out to Spinrad instead.
- Cosmo

- And now Johnny finally has the AAA membership he wants—for a decade, anyway. It'll be interesting to see what happens when Villiers claims it back.
- Fianchetto

- So /dev/, does this mean you're a Spinrad citizen now? (What do they call those, Spinizens?)
- Red

- If Spinrad's adopting former NeoNET corp families, nobody's told us—and even if they did, too many people from Novatech are out of jobs for SpinGlobal to take them all. I think any city in NorthAm and Asia with a major NeoNET presence is going to have a *lot* of new runners, if they don't already.
- /dev/grrl

THE OTHER VILLIERS DIVORCE

As you'd expect, the damages NeoNET had to pay and the loss of the Corporate Court seat were the straws that broke the camel's back. Fifteen years after being forged from the Crash, Novatech, Erika, and Transys-Neuronet went their separate ways.

- Even the NeoNET dissolution was another Villiers scheme. Apparently, he offered Malmstein and Celedyr a deal where Transys-Neuronet and Erika got cut loose before the Corporate Court decision was released, and Villiers got their shares in NeoNET in return. The dwarf and dragon agreed, then Villiers turned around and sold the Golden Ticket, and he and his Trans-Latvia ball and chain cashed in on Spinrad buying out NeoNET's share of the Z-OG Bank. Any truth to that, Miles?
- Mr. Bonds

- Let's just say I don't expect Richard to get birthday cards from them anytime soon.
- Miles Lanier

CORPORATE COURT RULING

(Excerpt from the Corporate Court's decision in United Canadian and American States, Plaintiff v. NeoNET, Celedyr, Anders Malmstein, and Richard Villiers, Defendants. Judgement rendered September 29, 2079. Delivered by Belczyk J. for the majority.)

"... for the foregoing reasons we find that, though Mr. Villiers was not directly responsible for the events leading to the widespread destruction in Boston, his failure to organize NeoNET's corporate structure in an effective manner created a gap in oversight which allowed these events to occur. As such, we declare that Mr. Villiers was grossly negligent and in breach of his fiduciary duty as chief executive officer of NeoNET.

Counsel for the United Canadian and American States has recommended that Mr. Villiers be barred from holding an officer or director position in any corporation under the jurisdiction of this court for a period of no less than ten years. The court accepts counsel's recommendation, and we do so order."

Since the split, Malmstein has been focusing heavily on Erika's operations in Africa, forming a partnership with A-rated Bosaso Industries in the Ethiomalian Territories, managing the Kilimanjaro mass driver, and doing other things that pointedly lack any connection to NeoNET's former endeavors. Celedyr, on the other hand, hasn't been seen in public since the Corporate Court decision. I suspect he's decided to lie low until the negative publicity blows over.

FAMILY HEIRLOOMS

Twenty years after its debut, the phoenix has risen from a different set of ashes, with a different Villiers at its helm. Richard has been grooming his daughter Caroline to follow in his footsteps for years, and after his sudden but inevitable departure, Cara took Richard's place as CEO of the much-diminished family business.

- "Much-diminished" is one way to put it. Everything except Novatech's core Matrix subsidiaries—the remnants of Fuchi, Mangadyne, Matrix Industries, and Central Industrial, among others—was sold off in the surprise restructuring.
- Mr. Bonds

- Yeah, but that still makes them one of the top Matrix outfits in the world, even if the Corporate Court downgrades them to A or AA. Villiers is still the majority shareholder, too, so Novatech isn't likely to be absorbed by another mega.
- Icarus

Shortly after Cara took the reins, Novatech moved its official headquarters from Boston to St. Louis, and Cara seems to have moved her own office into the ARCHology—which was transferred to Novatech ownership days before the Corporate Court ruling. Besides Novatech, Cara has also stepped into Richard's other director and officer positions, save for JRJ.

- Does the Corporate Court really think Villiers won't still be controlling those companies if his daughter's the one replacing him?
- Balladeer

- On the contrary, the Court's probably thrilled with that. Richard has the same problem with Cara as he did with Samantha: They're too much alike. It might mean they get along well, but it also means they'll only cooperate with each other when it benefits them, not out of any sense of familial loyalty.
- Icarus

As for Richard himself, he's as closed-mouthed about his schemes as ever, but I'm certain of one thing: He's not happy about taking Evo's share of the blame for CFD. Knowing him, he's already set plans into motion to see that injustice corrected. (Those of you willing to work for the archetypal corporate Mr. Johnson may be hearing more from your fixers soon.)

- Footloose and fancy-free, with a giant pile of nuyen and a grudge against the AAA that screwed him ... Villiers sounds like the next Art Dankwalther to me.
- Glitch

- Stop, the irony is killing me.
- Bull

FAREWELL

As I mentioned in my introduction, I first set virtual foot on this host—or node, or VPN, or whatever they're called nowadays—just over five years ago. Today will likely be the last time I do so as a primary contributor. I may still stop in from time to time, triumvirate allowing, but the simple fact is that my purpose for contacting Mr. MacCallister has been fulfilled. Besides, somebody has to keep Richard out of trouble, now that he has all that free time on his hands.

I never would've expected to say this when I first arrived, but thank you, JackPoint. Whatever our differences, you've consistently impressed me in the last few years. The aid you've lent me with my own struggle has been invaluable, and for that, you've earned my respect and my gratitude. I suspect that if we ever cross paths again, it'll be as opponents instead of cautious allies, but I wish you the best all the same.

-Miles Lanier

- Wait, after all this, he's still going to work with Villiers?
- Nephrine

- As has been observed in countless business articles, they complement each other well. Besides, Villiers has a ton of liquid cash, a lot of interesting ideas, and a perpetual sense of restlessness. How could it not be fun to be in his circle?
- Cosmo

- Right. Because Miles Lanier is all about the fun.
- Kay St. Irregular

GAME INFORMATION (GAMEMASTERS ONLY!)

CFD CURES

Just to be clear, CFD isn't gone. The goal of this chapter is to shift the focus away from outrunning a tsunami of gray goo and toward individual runners' interactions with CFD. We haven't seen the last of the Monads yet, but eventually they'll be just another part of the Sixth World. Characters—including player characters—can still be infected

with CFD, but now a brain-wipe is a risk, one that is more controllable than it was before.

As the narrative explained, the process of curing CFD is divided into two parts: first, evicting or "unmounting" the CFD personality fragment; and second, restoring the host's original personality.

UNMOUNTING

For the host, the unmounting stage will likely be the most dangerous part of the CFD treatment process; their body is still being controlled by a digital intelligence who's probably willing to use their life as a bargaining chip to secure its own freedom.

The process for the unmounting stage varies depending on which method is used. "Hardware" cures that destroy CFD nanites need only the Monad's exposure, although finding a way to do so may prove to be its own challenge. Overwriters may be applied by aerosol or injection, like other hard nanite systems, but aerosol application reduces the Overwriters' rating by half (rounded down). NanoScrub may only be applied by injection. Clever runners may find a way to apply these treatments through deception rather than brute force. However, even if the runners are able to dose their target without being caught, Monads who receive nanite-destroying treatments immediately become aware of the nanite damage when the treatment takes effect, if they weren't already. In most cases, the CFD personality will then attempt to take over the host's body via a Control Test (p. 199, *Lockdown*) and confront its attackers directly, if possible.

Once the treatment is in the host's system, the process continues as described below.

CFD TREATMENTS

NAME	AVAIL	COST
NanoScrub	16F	7,500¥
Overwriter Nanites	14F	5,000¥

Prices represent availability and cost of individual doses on the black market. An individual dose is considered Rating 1, but characters may increase the effective Rating by applying several doses in succession before the treatment takes effect.

Overwriter nanites: At the end of each Combat Turn the Overwriters are active, roll the Overwriters' Rating x 2 [Rating] vs. the CFD personality's Nanite Volume x 2. Net hits by either side reduce the other's Rating/Nanite Volume by 1/net hit, until either the Overwriter's Rating or the host's Nanite Volume is reduced to zero. Reducing the host's Nanite Volume to 0 removes the CFD infection. Due to their specialized programming, Overwriters have a shorter lifespan than most nanites; any Overwriters left in the host's body after the CFD infection is destroyed lose one point of Rating per day.

NanoScrub: An hour after the NanoScrub is injected and every full hour thereafter, both the host's Nanite Volume and the Rating of any other nanoware in the host's body are reduced by 1. The NanoScrub also loses a point of Rating each hour after the first. Again, if the Nanite Volume is reduced to 0 the CFD infection is removed.

To represent NanoScrub's side effects, roll a number of dice equal to the Nanoscrub's Rating at the beginning of the treatment. On a glitch, the NanoScrub affects the host's cyberware. Any headware, eyeware, or earware with a base Essence cost lower than (NanoScrub Rating / 10), before accounting for Essence cost reduction from Qualities or cyberware grades, is destroyed and must be replaced. On a critical glitch, the treatment fails, and the Monad becomes psychotic. Exactly what this entails is up to individual gamemasters, but as a general guideline, CFD personalities affected in this way become sadistic, violent, and totally unfettered by metahuman notions of morality. If the Monad hasn't done so already, the host will be fully overwritten in (10 - Nanite Volume) days, minimum 1. NanoScrub and Overwriter nanites may be used together. If any Overwriters are left in the host's body when the NanoScrub takes effect, their rating is reduced in the same manner as any other nanoware.

Nanohives: Treatments like NanoScrub and Overwriter nanites aren't capable of destroying CFD-infected nanohives on their own. Once the CFD infection is removed, however, the nanohive may be affected through the Matrix normally. If a CFD-infected nanohive isn't deactivated or removed by other means, it will replenish Nanite Volume (and thus the CFD infection), given time and the appropriate raw materials. See p. 200, *Lockdown*, for details.

If I Go, This Host Dies: As a last-ditch effort to survive, a Monad may hold its host hostage,

threatening to kill them if the attackers don't stand down. To make good on their threat, the Monad may take a Complex Action and use its nanites to stop the host's heart, placing them into 1 box of Physical Overflow damage, which accumulates as normal. Any form of medical treatment will restart the host's heart, requiring the Monad to spend another Complex Action if they want to use this ability again. (Yes, this can lead to repeating the process multiple times.)

SERIOUSLY? THAT'S IT?

The biggest weakness of the "hardware" approach to treating CFD is that most of the actual *treatment* is out of the players' hands. Don't let that turn into them sitting out from one of the most pivotal moments of the campaign.

If you need inspiration on how to involve the players in a player-less cure, look no further than Murphy's Law. What if the skinny elf Monad shakes off his troll-sized dose of Narcoject and breaks out of his restraints, and the street samurai has to keep him from escaping long enough for the mage to lay him out with a stunbolt? What if the team couldn't get a Faraday cage, and now the face has to explain why the nice Knight Errant officer's commlink got jammed when he drove past while the technomancer keeps the "kidnapped ork girl" from geeking them all with the rigger's own drones?

No matter what your favorite brand of mayhem is, there's no reason your players have to sit around while the MacGuffin does their job for them.

If the runners want to take the fight to the Monads directly (or if they're afraid of needles), they'll use the "software" approach. The first is the mind-hack strategy, portrayed in fiction in *Data Trails*, where deckers create a DNI link with a Monad and take their battle against CFD to the Matrix. For the purposes of a mind-hack, Monads use most of the same rules for Matrix combat as AIs; see **AI Matrix Combat**, p. 154, *Data Trails*. However, as there are some important differences between AIs and Monads, we'll reproduce a portion of those rules here for convenience.

- Monads use their own Mental Attributes for Matrix combat, in the same manner as AIs, deckers, and technomancers. They use Matrix Entity Concentration in place of Depth, and Nanite Volume in place of Essence.
- Treat Monads as AIs running on a home device, with a Device Rating equal to their Nanite Volume. The nanoswarm "device" possesses all four Matrix attributes, but does not have program slots. A Monad's Matrix Initiative Rating is (Nanite Volume + Intuition) + 4D6, and they are always considered to be in hot-sim, gaining the +2 bonus to all Matrix actions.
- In Matrix combat, Monads have two Condition Monitors: a Core Condition Monitor with 8 + (Matrix Entity Concentration / 2) boxes, representing their "source code", and a Matrix Condition Monitor with 8 + (Nanite Volume / 2) boxes, representing their nanoswarm. Damage to these condition monitors is tracked separately. Monads use Willpower + Firewall for both forms of Damage Resistance Test.
- A Monad's Core Damage may be repaired with an Extended Software + Matrix Entity Concentration [Nanite Volume] (1 day) Test, repairing one box of Core Damage with each hit. Matrix Damage is repaired with a normal Hardware Test (p. 228, *SR5*); the Monad may not be assisted by others, but may apply their Nanite Volume as a tool kit bonus to the roll. Repairing damage in this way lowers the Monad's Nanite Volume by 1 per "injury" as damaged nanites are cannibalized for materials. Lost Nanite Volume may be restored normally.
- If a Monad's Core Condition Monitor is reduced to 0, they are disrupted. Any other personas connected to their nanoswarm "device" are immediately dumped, and suffer dumpshock, if applicable. The Monad's Nanite Volume is reduced by 1 + any unresisted overflow damage. (Nanite Volume lost in this way may be restored normally.) If the overflow damage would reduce the Monad's Nanite Volume to 0, it is permanently destroyed. Otherwise, the Monad personality goes dormant for (10 - Nanite Volume, minimum 1) hours while its source code is recompiled.
- If a Monad's Matrix Condition Monitor is reduced to 0 (i.e., the nanites are bricked), the Monad is immediately and permanently destroyed. However, all those melting, sparking nanite corpses have one final

mark to leave on the host's delicate grey matter, reducing both the current *and* maximum ratings of the host's Mental Attributes by (Nanite Volume / 4), rounded down.

Due to their inability to simply leave their biological platforms, Monads are vulnerable to the Format Device Action and have taken steps to fortify themselves against it. Monads add their Nanite Rating as a bonus to their dice pool when defending against Format Device attempts. If a hacker succeeds at formatting the Monad's nanoswarm, the Monad may repair the damaged boot sector by spending a number of Complex Actions equal to the net hits on the hacker's Format Device roll; no roll is required, but they may not take any other actions during this time. Any Monad rebooted without undoing the damage to its boot sector is destroyed as if by Core overflow damage—restoring the Monad by replacing the nanoswarm's software is impossible.

Last but not least, those wacky technomancers have discovered a new way to apply their unique Resonance abilities to the "Monad problem": a new Echo, called **Defrag**.

NEW RULES FOR TECHNOMANCERS

NEW ECHO: DEFRAG

The Defrag Echo grants the technomancer access to the Unmount Resonance Action, which (shockingly) allows the technomancer to "unmount" both AIs and Monads, forcibly removing them from their biological hosts and home devices. For details on the Unmount Resonance Action, see the description below.

Defrag also allows the technomancer to offer nearby devices protection from glitches. Technomancers with this Echo may increase the number of 1s required to glitch by (Submersion Grade / 3), over a number of PANs equal to 1 + (Submer-

sion Grade). The technomancer must either have a mark on the target or apply the effect to a target on which they're currently sustaining a complex form. The target must be within 100 meters of the technomancer when the protection is first applied, but the protection will remain in place if they move beyond that range, ending when the technomancer loses the mark or drops the complex form.

NEW RESONANCE ACTION: UNMOUNT AI/MONAD

Unmounting an AI or Monad requires either Matrix connectivity, or a device which the target can use as a temporary residence. The technomancer rolls either their Charisma + Willpower, or if they have the Decompiling skill, they may add their Willpower to the normal Decompiling + Resonance roll. Regardless of the roll used, AIs resist with their Depth Rating x 2, and Monads resist with their Matrix Entity Concentration x 2.

If the technomancer accumulates net hits equal to the AI's Depth or the Monad's Matrix Entity Concentration, the unmount is successful, and the digital intelligence is ejected from its host and escapes into the Matrix. If the target is an AI within its home device, the AI also loses that device as its home.

The Unmount action is extremely taxing to its user. For each hit (not net hit) the target rolls on its Depth or Matrix Entity Concentration rolls, the technomancer must resist two points of Fading, with a minimum of 2.

OTHER METHODS

Characters suffering from CFD who are on good terms with JackPoint (or who know people who are) may have a program mysteriously appear on their commlink: a CFD-suppression AI created by FastJack, as described in the novel *Undershadows*. The AI calls itself Fletcher Bissell, sports a variant of Jack's own all-gray icon (which those who are versed in decker lore may recognize), and effectively puts a character's CFD into remission. No further tests are required. The CFD personality is still present in the host's mind but is completely cut off from the Matrix and unable to act on its own. The host may hold mental conversations with the CFD personality if they choose and may even let the personality fragment out to act independently in the Matrix, like an agent or sprite. (Gamemasters should be very careful with letting the players use a Monad this way. If they do, remember that the Monad is an intelligent being held captive against their will. If the Monad can't overpower FastJack's CFD-suppression AI, leading their host into circumstances that allow the Monad to regain control—or that get the host killed out of spite—are the next best options.)

Although FastJack brought all his considerable skill to bear when coding Fletcher, a suppressed Monad has two advantages: an inborn understanding of the Matrix, and near-infinite time. It's possible that a Monad could eventually disable the AI and resume their takeover of the host with a vengeance. Rather than give detailed rules on when and how that might happen, we'll just suggest having FastJack's AI fail whenever it's dramatically appropriate for your campaign.

Particularly persuasive characters might be able to, against all odds, talk the Monad into permanently giving up control of its host. Mechanically, this should be treated the same as any other Social Test, with the runners suffering penalties for being enemies and for the results being disastrous to the Monad; unless the team has a way for the Monad to leave the host, the runners are essentially trying to convince the Monad to commit suicide. (Also remember that mental Manipulation spells can't be used against Monads, and that even if they could, this very much falls into the "harmful to self" category.) Access to a technomancer with the Defrag Echo or equipment similar to what Evo used for the DSECI uploads would be a great help in convincing the Monad to leave the host. Monads with the means to do so might even hire runner teams to find exactly that.

CFD SURVIVORS

When it comes to recovering someone lost to CFD, the disorder's one saving grace—or a fate worse than death, depending on who you ask—is that hosts taken over by a Monad aren't truly "overwritten." Although most CFD survivors have no memory of time when the CFD personality was in control, a few were subjected to brief periods of watching while another entity took control of their body. Whether the host remembers their "possession" or not, the trauma can have far-reaching effects.

Once the CFD personality has been unmounted, many fully overwritten survivors end up in a semi-responsive catatonic state, represented by

WHAT ABOUT BOSTON?

Astute readers will note that the Monad Matrix combat rules used here are different than the rules given in **Hacking the Minds of Madness** (p. 202, *Lockdown*). This is intentional; the nanites carrying the Lockdown strain of CFD function differently than the original model, and campaigns set anywhere other than the NEMA aren't likely to encounter Lockdown-strain CFD in any case. For the purposes of this chapter, "Monads" refers to those affected by the original strain of CFD, who don't possess any innate Matrix connectivity (and thus can't be hacked in the same way as Lockdown-strain Monads can).

However, if you'd rather use the Lockdown rules (or your own) as a base for Monad-related Matrix combat, feel free to do so. Even without the Core damage option, hackers could still unmount a Monad by bricking or formatting their nanoswarm. They couldn't use Control Device or Spoof Command to force the nanites to leave the host's body, however; a Monad's nanoswarm is subsumed into their persona in the same way a decker's cyberdeck becomes part of theirs, making it impossible to control independently. We'd also strongly suggest keeping the Monads' extra resistance to Format Device Actions, since they don't have a techomancer's immunity to it and can't just repair or replace their nanoswarm.

the Blank Slate Negative Quality (p. 57, *Chrome Flesh*). Fully overwritten characters may regain their old personalities through specially created personafixes, made from existing persona recordings of themselves before being afflicted with CFD, or neural imprints stored in a part of the Deep Resonance known as the Mind Realms. Persona recordings are rare—the ones featuring celebrities other than simsense stars are usually synthesized best guesses, not actual recordings—and it should be suitably difficult for the runners to get a hold of one, to the point that doing so could easily be the purpose of its own run, if not an entire campaign.

A much smaller number of CFD survivors are able to awaken from their fugue immediately, whole and relatively sane but with no memory of the time between the CFD personality's takeover and the present. Characters who remain functional after their CFD experience may still suffer a wide range of psychological effects, including Negative Qualities like Amnesia (p. 152, *Run Faster*), Flashbacks (p. 155, *RF*), a Phobia (p. 157, *RF*) related to mind control, or any number of other mental health-related Negative Qualities. (For full lists, see pp. 77–87, *SR5*; pp. 151–159, *Run Faster*; and pp. 57–60, *Chrome Flesh*.) If using an existing character, whether the runner receives Karma for these Qualities or not is up to the gamemaster's discretion.

NEONET COLLAPSE

Rules covering all the potential fallout of an AAA megacorp are slightly beyond the scope of a single chapter, or even a single book. However, there are a few things that gamemasters may want to consider. First, NeoNET's breakup is a different situation than Richard Villiers' previous corporate collapses—Fuchi was distributed between three other megacorps when Novatech was formed, and the merger that created NeoNET was arguably an umbrella slapped over corps that were still basically independent from one another. The important part is that, beneath all the window-dressing, those events largely boiled down to the same groups of people doing the same jobs before and after the reorganization, just under a different corporate logo. This time, the staggering losses inflicted on NeoNET by the CFD disaster have driven parts of the corporation out of business. Corporate citizens' standing is in jeopardy, because the corporation that gave them citizenship no longer exists.

For runners, this can mean a few things. Thousands of former NeoNET citizens may become SINless, and a portion of them may turn to the shadows. Products made by former NeoNET subsidiaries may change in availability or price, or be replaced by offerings from other corps. NeoNET fake SINs will be burned automatically. The NeoNET grid will be taken offline, possibly including any Matrix infrastructure they managed. NeoNET corp scrip will be even more worthless than it was when the CFD's origins became public. There's currently no guarantee that Spinrad Global will take over any of NeoNET's assets, but if the players use these things heavily, gamemasters may want to allow them to rebrand from NeoNET to SpinGlobal and carry on with business as usual.

THE HIDDEN FACTION

The cupcake came to her shoulders. And that was only because this particular one didn't have a cherry on top. If it had, it might well be taller than her.

Ulex skipped across the tabletop, flitting her wings merrily. Others of her kind often sat on small chairs on top of the table, with small plates holding dainty portions, but Ulex didn't hold with that. They had invited her to a forest of food, and it seemed ungracious to waste the opportunity.

Four courses had already come and gone, each one whisked away so quickly that they might have been illusory. And what if they were? Few beings here needed actual food. The banquets were more about the impression, the feeling of food, and if magic could supply that as well as actual food, why complain?

Because no matter where they came from, these cupcakes were huge.

And there was more. Eclairs like canoes. Cream puffs where the layer of cream was a giant cloud capable of supporting a world of pastry. And cakes—so many cakes. Rich chocolate, seeded herb cake, airy angel food, lemon with a delicate drizzle of frosting—everything bakers could conceive, and some combos that had been invented today. For this was the Cyprian Banquet, one of the top three banquets in the Court. Ulex had never ascended so high, and she was determined to enjoy it. She stuck her hand in a cream puff and grabbed a handful of whipped cream. Who would notice a missing dollop the size of a pixie's hand?

It was as thick and rich as she hoped.

Then, to make her experience all the more magical, she was recognized. She saw an elf whispering to a gnome, covering her mouth but clearly looking her way, talking about her. Ulex made eye contact with the elf, and the elf beamed.

"It is you, isn't it?" she said. "You're the lawyer!"

Ulex skipped across the table to make the conversation easier. "I'm a representative," she said. "The term 'lawyer' doesn't really apply."

"But still, you're in the middle of it all! Part of what everyone is talking about! And you might uncover a murderer!"

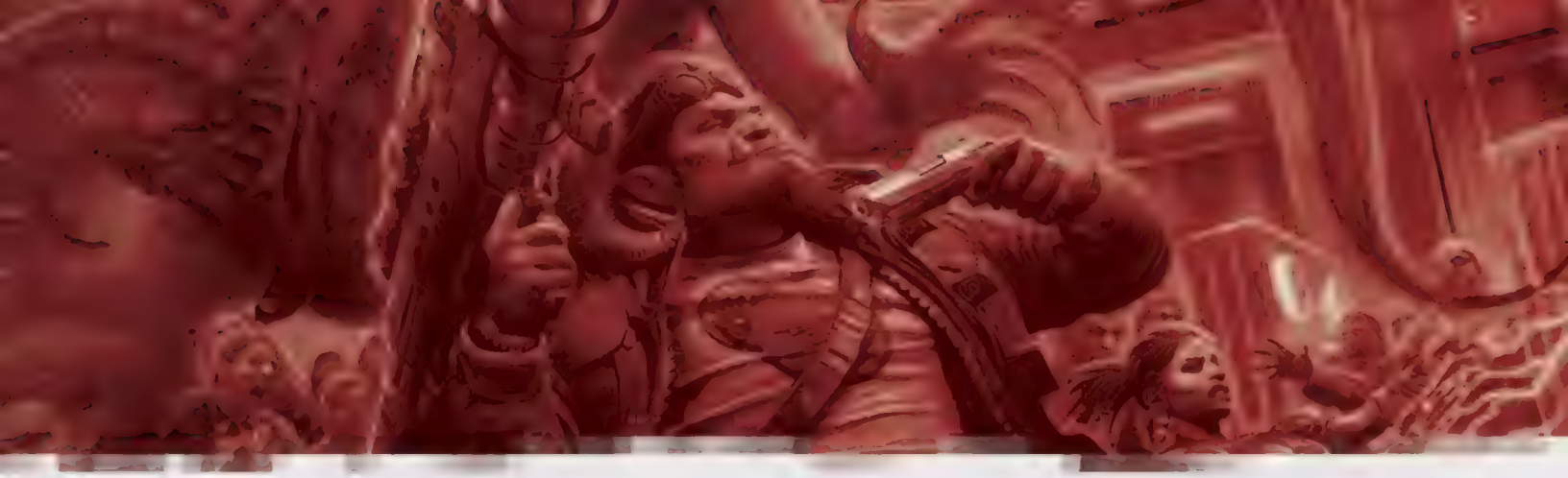
"Yes, it's all very glamorous. But really, I consider it my duty. We can't have a killer wandering around the Court!"

The elf leaned closer. She wore a swirl of white mist and flat blue, so it was like the sky was wrapped around her. "But it's not just that. What about the Shadow faction? Do you really believe it exists?"

Ulex didn't know this elf. She didn't know most of the people in this room. A lesser person might worry about being out of her depth, but Ulex had wings. She could always stay above it all as long as she wanted. But anyway, there was one thing she knew for certain—the question the elf had asked would be asked repeatedly tonight, and her answer would be repeated far and wide. That's why she had spent much of the week working on the answer.

"I trust in the bright light of truth, and I will shine it. Whether it chases shadows or casts darker ones depends on how people stand in that light."

Then she skipped off.



COURTROOM DRAMA

POSTED BY: ELIJAH

Tracking what's happening in the Seelie Court is not easy even in the calmest circumstances, and the current circumstances are far from calm. The trial of Duke Flowerpot is sucking up a lot of attention in the Court, and all the intrigue that is normally present in the Court is centered around this event. Anyone who says they understand the whole thing is lying, but I'll share what I know here. I'll set up the basics, then share some of the things that have tongues wagging in the Court. Be warned: There will be few definitive answers. The Court loves and treasures its mysteries.

Some of the oddity of this whole situation begins with the original complaint, so it makes a good starting point for this discussion.

A SWORN TESTIMONY

Bastards are bastards. They always have been, they always will be. Their destiny is their name, and vice versa. The fact that you are a Bastard does not, however, mean that is the only thing you can be. More happens beyond our walls, and within them. You have to look, but I have seen.

Duke Flowerpot. Not a real name. Not a real line. Scraps of color, empty words, distractions hoping to hide the fact that there is nothing there. When there is no loyalty, no true devotion, you become a vessel for others. Waiting to see who will fill you up.

Flowerpot is a Bastard, but he is more. He has a stain on him. A stain that has arrived since unwelcome guests came to Court. A shadow has fallen over our hall. A Shadow.

Gristle Teres lived in the shadows. He saw them start to take substance. He was aware. So he was killed. It was complicated magic, arranged by one who has his finger in too many pies. Or his roots spread among many pots.

I swear, before the officers of the Court and anyone who asks, that Duke Flowerpot is a traitor, a killer, and an emissary of Shadow.

The Court will judge. My axe will wait.

—Donal Viltharion, Court Executioner

- So I guess the Seelie Court's evidentiary procedures are a little different than ours, since that testimony didn't include anything that sounds remotely like evidence.
- Kay St. Irregular

- The Court's a tricky thing, all right. With a building that changes regularly, denizens who shift appearances just as often—or who may not have any corporeal presence at all—and magical illusions that go far beyond anything we know about, the term "reality" has a different meaning there than it does on our plane. Physical things are not seen as being "real;" that is, their physicality does not grant them extra credibility or weight as evidence. Instead, character, motivations, power, and desires are much more likely to be viewed as substantial, since they play a strong role in shaping the reality courtiers experience. A trial in the Court concerns itself much more with the substance of the accused's character than with a who did what, when and where kind of narrative. Whoever can put forth the most persuasive portrait of the accused's character is going to carry the day. In this light, Viltharion's opening salvo makes more sense.
- Frosty

- Too often the search for truth begins without a solid understanding of the nature of truth. The limited success that follows is only natural.
- Man-of-Many-Names

In case the testimony there is not clear enough, Viltharion is accusing Duke Flowerpot of the murder of Gristle Teres. As a refresher, Teres was an unpleasant individual of uncertain affiliation who was publicly and spectacularly killed when he was

levitated into a chandelier. While he was rapidly rotating. Because the motive for the assassination was so obtuse, many people decided it was the work of one of the rumored hidden factions of the Court. Without clear motivations for Teres' murder, though, most of the speculation was idle, the sort of thing that passed the time at some of the lesser banquets. Viltharion's formal accusation has moved the matter up to discussion at the most formal banquets, and the rumor mill is churning hard. Questions people are asking include: Does Viltharion really believe Flowerpot committed the murder, or is he just exercising a grudge? His testimony seems to indicate that he has identified Shadow as the hidden faction that Flowerpot is working for. Does he have any clear ideas about what other parties might be involved in this faction? And if there truly is a Shadow faction, where will it be aligned in the Court?

We might find some guidance for this question in the tarot, though of course Sixth World diviners are still hashing out the finer shades of meaning of some of the arcana of this particular deck. What they have come up with for the meaning of the Shadows card is not encouraging, though. It speaks of plans being disrupted, alliances being broken, fear and uncertainty growing. Upright, it brings enemies and fear. Inverse, it brings confusion and error. In a reading, when this card shows up, it seldom brings good results with it. This means that plenty of courtiers are quite nervous about what the appearance of a Shadow faction might mean.

As it turns out, though, this accusation is only the start of the activities that are roiling the Court.

Let's discuss the simple things first, or at least the things that follow some sort of pattern. Viltharion is taking his complaint to trial. As you might guess, trials in the Court are not like trials here, and they also don't tend to resemble any other trial in the Court. Physical evidence is almost never pre-

sented, because no one trusts it. Auras are more likely to be used, but they can be extremely tricky. If you want to use them as evidence about who cast a particular spell, you have to have some way of preserving the aura, convincing people that the method was not vulnerable to manipulation, and making sure the aura was not altered in any way. That's a considerable burden. Using auras to gauge various people's emotions during trial proceedings, on the other hand, happens regularly. It's not just about looking for evidence of truth or falsehood, but scanning the crowd to see who reacts to which statements and how. This usually goes along with someone watching facial expressions and body language so that can be compared and contrasted with auras. Spirits are often enlisted for the aura-scanning role, so knowing spirits with enough emotional intelligence to understand what they are seeing is a critical part of succeeding in a Court trial—or any Court affair, really.

- Many people foolishly default to spirits of man for this role, on the assumption that they are the most human and therefore will give you the most accurate read of the emotions being seen. This has some truth to it, but it can also be limiting. Understanding the relative strengths of different types of spirits can help you call on the right ones if you know what you are looking for. Fire spirits are more sensitive to hints of anger, so they can be valuable for seeing sparks that others might miss. Earth spirits are skilled at detecting sadness. Like anything else, this is an area where you should think carefully about how to select the best tool.
- Winterhawk

Rhetorical skill is an incredibly important part of Court trials, and speeches and presentations are performed with full knowledge that people in the courtroom are being watched on all levels. If you are arguing a case, you need people in the courtroom to react to what you are saying. The greatest failure is to leave people feeling calm, neutral, or heaven forbid, bored. You need them hanging on your words, you need to take them by surprise, and you need to weave a narrative that will be both compelling and sensible. If you want a model of how to argue a case in the Court, look at Mark Antony's funeral speech in *Julius Caesar*. Graceful, eloquent, and very much able to lead listeners by the nose. It would have been fascinating to scan the crowd during that speech, to see who flashed anger as Antony's own passion grew—and to see who registered fear as they understood what was happening.

But I digress. As you might imagine, with the skill to move people's emotions and a careful scan of those people being so important, the other critical element involves who is in the room during trial proceedings. That is where we are now, as people argue about who should be in the room, who will be in the room, and what it will take to get certain people there. This is one of those exercises where the power games of the Court really shine. There are strong risk-reward balances to take into account. Obviously, if you attend, your aura and expression are going to be studied by many different people. You may think you have strong control over all these elements, but few people are aware of their own tells. So it might seem that the safest thing to do is to stay far away from the proceedings. No one can see you reacting to words you don't hear.

But that's not always advisable. There are still a number of justice systems here on our plane that cling to the idea that people cannot be made to incriminate themselves. If someone is silent on an issue, their silence can not be interpreted as indicative of guilt. The Court has no such niceties. Individuals who avoid any proceeding where they might be implicated are assumed to be hiding something. Individuals who will not engage in rhetoric in their defense are assumed to be guilty and/or cowardly.

This may seem odd or even unfair, but keep in mind the reasons protections against self incrimination exist, and the tools available to courtiers. Historically, the main reason people have the right to avoid self-incrimination is to avoid confessions that emerge from coercion or torture. In the Court, though, torture and coercion—at least, crude physical coercion—do not work. The people and beings watching the auras of people confessing falsely to crimes would see the lies; the pain they experienced and the fear they are under would be clear, and the confession would be viewed as useless. Whatever work was put into generating the forced confession would be wasted as soon as the confession was made. It is better, then, to not put in that work in the first place.

If a genuine confession cannot be coerced, the thinking goes, then people should have no fear of speaking in open court. If you are not willing to speak, others will assume you have something to hide, and that will be held against you.

All that is to say: If you think you might be accused of anything in a Court proceeding, you bet-

ter be at that proceeding, or assumptions are going to go against you. You cannot stay above it. You cannot invoke some sort of right, or ask people not to leap to conclusions. Leaping to conclusions is what the whole process is about, so telling people not to do it will not get you anywhere. Show up, and have your game face on.

- It's more than that. Develop a strategy of your own. If you spend your time in the Court just reacting to things around you, before long you'll be caught flat footed and made to look really bad. That's why so much effort is spent in the Court on learning the plans of others and figuring out what kind of tale they're trying to spin. Get out in front of it and set up your own narrative. Best story wins.
- Frosty

With that established, what kind of cases are the various factions involved in this affair going to weave? That, of course, is not entirely clear, as courtiers pride themselves on their last-minute surprises. Here, though, is what I have been able to piece together about some of the motives and positioning happening in the pre-trial period.

VILTHARION AND AES SIDHE BANRIGH

This is the faction at the heart of this affair, and appropriately enough it starts the mystery that suffuses this whole affair. As an office-holder of the Court, Viltharion is considered a member of Aes Sidhe Banrigh. His position, though, was given him as a punishment, and his standing with other functionaries is weak at best. If you looked at Court members who would be most likely to act independently to advance Aes Sidhe Banrigh interests, Viltharion would be at the bottom of the list.

Still, his accusation and the approaching trial is formal procedure, and the Queen has control of all formal procedures. If the accusation were just an example of Viltharion going rogue, couldn't the Queen just quash it, make it disappear without any trouble? Absolutely. But she didn't. In the opinion of many courtiers, that is evidence enough to show that the Queen approves of this action.

It has to be noted that while the accusation that Duke Flowerpot killed Gristle Teres is interesting, the heart of the matter is the accusation that there is a real, active Shadow faction, and Flowerpot is part of it. That is the part of the matter that is truly shaking the Court, making people wonder who they can trust and if supposed allies are truly their friends. Since the Queen is allowing this matter to continue, many are taking that as tacit acceptance that the Shadow faction is real. That is the part of the matter that is truly disruptive.

Many people believe the chaos and confusion bear the fingerprints of Chief Adviser Alessius Vyperalyn. Vyperalyn is not the most popular member of his own faction, and he has used the changes in the Court since the Yellowstone Calamity (an affair many believe he had a hand in) to realign power structures to work with his interests and to make allies on the material plane. Some believe this trial is an effort by him to break old alliances, make new ones, and re-shape the Court in a way he likes.

If Vyperalyn is thought to be in favor of a certain action, then the Queen's Champion, Lord Serrin Sol, would be against it. Sol thinks Vyperalyn is too tricky by half, and he also strongly objects to the extra visitors from the material plane that have made their way to the Court in recent times. On top of that, Lord Sol has always been a man who likes to make his first impressions of people based on their faction affiliation, and if he can't trust that bit of information, much of the core foundation of what he knows is undermined. Lord Sol has no desire to believe in the existence of a hidden faction, if only for personal convenience.

- That divide between Sol and Vyperalyn is always a good one to work in the Court. Both of them have a sense of decorum, so they won't openly say bad things about their rival, but if you can generate enough hints that something you are doing will hinder their rival, their assistance is more likely to be forthcoming.
- Fianchetto

DUKE FLOWERPOT AND THE BASTARD FACTION

Absolutely no one at the Court is surprised that the Bastard faction was the target of these accusations. The longstanding animosity between Aes Sidhe Banrigh and Bastard is well known, and Bastard's outreach to the material plane has made them seem like opportunists at best, loyal to powers outside the Court at worst. And while Bastard is a divisive faction, Duke Flowerpot is a divisive figure in it, making him extra-special. He cares about faction growth and progress insofar as it builds his own reputation; some within the

faction are concerned that if Flowerpot ever went to another faction, a substantial number of the people he recruited would leave with him.

This puts faction leader Tsukiko in a difficult spot. No one doubts her loyalty, but it is also clear that she will do what is needed to build faction strength. There are few doubts that this would include working to support a hidden faction if it served her interests. If Duke Flowerpot has a connection to Shadow (assuming Shadow exists), she might be hard-pressed to disavow it, considering what the loss of that alliance—and the loss of Flowerpot—would do to her power. But if she ties herself to the hidden faction and Viltharion succeeds in portraying it as a deceitful, disreputable nest of murderers, Bastard will suffer greatly in the backlash.

It's a difficult spot, but one reason Tsukiko has ascended to her position is her unflappability. She has shown no panic, and while it's not clear how she'll respond to this situation, she radiates confidence that the crisis will be navigated without disaster.

- Will the truth you desire to make it so.
- Man-of-Many-Names

- That's MOMN-speak for "Fake it 'til you make it."
- Haze

HIGHER POWER

If you're boring, you think Higher Power will support the Queen and Aes Sidhe Banrigh throughout this whole process, working to make sure the structure of the Seelie Court stays intact. If you're that conventional in your thinking, though, you probably haven't had much success in the Court. If you're subtle enough to have made some actual headway in Court affairs, you'll understand that factions invariably work angles, and that when Higher Power seeks to strengthen the Court, what they are saying is that it would be stronger if they have more power. Higher Power being what it is, they are not going to do anything drastic like a coup or anything, though something akin to the Glorious Revolution might be up their alley. As a quick reminder, that revolution happened when a good section of the United Kingdom's Parliament lost faith in their king and decided to invite a nearby monarch to come and take over. If a large group of factions banded together and decided to invite Higher Power to be the new leaders of the Seelie Court, it is extremely unlikely that they would say no.

How do you build an alliance to replace the current faction in power? By making people lose faith in that faction. One way to do this would be to show that the current leaders spend a lot of Court time focused on a trial designed to ferret out a hidden faction, only to find that none of their accusations have merit, and the whole trial was a waste of time.

This means that on the surface, Higher Power will be a firm supporter of the trial and will claim to be interested in getting to the bottom of Viltharion's accusations. But behind the scenes, they might well be allies for the other side.

- Their behind-the-scenes training might be all about sharing some of their secrets of emotional control. Higher Power is a stern, dignified faction, known for their absolute refusal to crack under pressure. If they want to help a hidden faction stay hidden, they could coach faction members in how to maintain their trademark stoicism. The trick being that before they could teach them, they would have to find them.
- Lyran

- In which case they would have an inside track on knowing who is part of this faction, and those members would owe them a debt. That's how you build power.
- Frosty

DEATH

One of the oddities I have noticed in the Seelie Court is that while many courtiers are immortal, or close to immortal, they still treat Death the way we mortals treat death. That is to say, the subject is often avoided, and when it is brought up it is with hushed tones and concerned faces as people worry that merely invoking the name will bring about the calamity they hope to avoid.

- Remember that the War of Sorrows feels very recent to many of the fae, and thus their lack of immortality is all too apparent. They have reason to fear both Death and death.
- Frosty

One of the aspects of Death that makes people so nervous is the fact that its deepest goals are unknown. Yes, they push change. But change for change's sake is an empty exercise, giving you no guarantees that whatever you end up with will be better than what you changed away from. For the

work to be anything but an exercise in randomness, something has to help guide that change. The fact that people do not know what guides Death is as nerve-wracking to courtiers as anything else.

The facts that are known about Death's involvement in the Flowerpot trial are these: 1) They are involved; and 2) They hope to use it to pursue their agenda of change in the Court. That brings us to the end of certainty. How deeply are they involved? Do they have an idea for what the Court should look like once the current power structure is overturned? If you have that information, there are courtiers ready to offer you payments in currency you can scarcely imagine.

- I don't know. I can imagine quite a bit.
- Haze

- Well, if you're going to crib, crib from the classics. Anyway, I'll tell you at least one thing they want: cards. Tarot cards. They think the cards can play a large role in bringing chaos to the Court, and they want to have as many of them as possible. If you know the location of a card—or better yet, if you have one—contact a representative of Death.
- Fianchetto

- I should add that I derived considerable enjoyment from writing the phrase "contact a representative of Death."
- Fianchetto

- Ah, but the trick is finding one. Here's one hint—keep an eye on Ulex, the pixie representing Viltharion's interests through the trial process. She's an unknown quantity in many respects, but there have been occasional rumors connecting her to Death. If she botches the job and makes Aes Sidhe Banrigh look bad, those rumors will only increase.
- Lyran

DRAGON

The Dragon faction has looked on all of the proceedings to this point with the same scorn they look at just about anything that is not directly related to them. Duke Flowerpot and Donal Viltharion are both in peculiar spots when it comes to Dragon. Viltharion has the longstanding fae blood that would normally gain him approval from Dragon, but his missteps and shallowness have not made them eager to claim any kinship to him. Duke Flowerpot's lineage is, if anything, more impressive than Viltharion's, with his loose connections to the Tuatha de Danaan. But Flowerpot's self-centeredness and poisonous enmity, along with his occasional frivolity, are not what Dragon likes to see in a True Fae.

Thus, the whole affair is one that Dragon suspects is beneath the honor of the Court. Yet Lady Brane Deigh has allowed matters to proceed forward, and there are members of Dragon who have as much faith in the Lady as anyone outside her own faction does. And of course Dragon has close ties with Magister Vyperalyn, who is perhaps as enthusiastic as anyone about the trial. The faction wants to address the matters the trial will bring up with their accustomed dignity and gravity, but they have no real idea how to pull that off.

To sum up, the Dragon faction would really like to start throwing around their considerable weight, but they are not clear in which direction it should be thrown.

- Part of the internal division here is The Crimson Order versus the rest of the faction. The Crimson Order likes stability and tradition even more than the rest of the faction does, and they are only interested in relationships insofar as they further their larger goals. That means they don't feel they owe loyalty to Vyperalyn if Vyperalyn starts working against order and tradition. That's exactly what they feel is happening with this trial, that it is more flash and nonsense rather than the substantial business with which the Court should be concerned.
- Arete

- Permanent bans don't seem to be as permanent as they used to be.
- Pistons

- The Black Lodge likes to throw up reminders that they have ways into things that others don't know about, so that even when they have been found out, they still hold undiscovered secrets. So, Triumverate, you've been reminded.
- Sunshine

THE EVIDENCE

We are now finished with the relatively clear-cut portion of this affair. Now we move on to the murk, the mystery, the confusion, and the second-guesses. Gathering information in the Seelie Court is a delicate affair. Recording devices are not common, but people still talk—and write—like their information is bound to fall into the hands of someone who wants to use it against them. This means that people communicate in coded mes-

sages, and with allusions and references instead of direct statements. Everything below is subject to interpretation.

THE CARD

With Viltharion identifying Shadow as a supposed Hidden Faction, interest has spiked in the Shadow card of the Sixth World Tarot. There are a number of variants of this card floating into and out of the Court, and none of them have been definitively identified as the "real" card. The card portrays a dark alley with a door leading to some sort of club or bar, along with three different neon sides. On all variants of the card, the location in the center is known as "The Dark Side." Two dogs fight in front of the door. Lurking above the alley is a shadowy armed figure who likely is not bringing good things with him. Those are the basics, but a lot of other elements vary. These variances have been assiduously pored over by Tarot students. They include:

An astrological sign in the name of a bar: In cards that have been recorded, this spot has been called the Scorpio Room, the Pisces Room, and the Virgo Room. The appearance of Pisces and Virgo are notable because those signs are generally considered to be opposites. Virgo is a calm, friendly sign; Pisces is secretive, intense, and very dedicated. Some people consider Pisces to be a symbol of Shadow, and they claim that it is the name on the true card. The appearance of Virgo, they suggest, is an overture of peace, asserting that they will not be the troublesome presence many believe that they will be. But if that is the case, what do we do about the appearance of Scorpio? The vengeful side of the Scorpio sign is well known, and its appearance on this card is the source of great concern.

The plain sign: On the left side of the alley is a one-word sign that indicates a place without any particular specific designator. On some variants, it says Theatre; on others, Restaurant; on still others, Hotel (whether this is a beauty parlor or some sort of discussion parlor or something else is not clear). This is a puzzle. There is nothing distinguishing about this label, and it is not clear why this is there.

- Two of those things—restaurant and hotel—sit on the lowest tier of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The other, the theatre, sits on the highest tier. I have to admit that I have no idea if this is significant.
- Nephrine

The water tower: A water tower toward the background of the picture has an animal on it, either a crab, a scorpion, or a lobster. The scorpion—probably not coincidentally—appears on the same card as the label "The Scorpio Room" on the right side of the card. The crab and the lobster are more traditional representations for this card. In traditional tarot decks, this spot in the major arcana would be taken by the Moon card, and a crab or lobster often appears in that card as a representation of the divine potential of us all (the dogs, by the way, are also a traditional part of Moon symbology). This would seem to represent the emerging prominence of the Shadow faction—and would also seem to indicate that the scorpion-themed card is not the "real" one.

- Dalí used lobsters to symbolize his fear of castration. Just sayin'.
- Pistons

So what does all this mean? Good question. As with most of the Tarot, objects are subject to individual interpretation, or a variety of meanings depending on circumstances. But should a card turn up in the course of your examination of this affair, you'll know the basics of its symbolism.

- It should be noted that a paper bag sits near the nightclub door, and it has the notorious Taco Temple logo on it. This is particularly interesting if you view Taco Temple as a front for a vast shadowrunning operation.
- Winterhawk

The Pendulum Manuscript: The Pendulum is one of the Court's oddities, a large wooden banquet room continually swinging from four thick ropes connected to who knows what. The tables in this room normally stand up well to the constant swinging, but three days after Viltharion made his statement, a visiting shadowrunner named Cass Wandering Horse entered into the Pendulum room and found it in complete disarray. He also saw a manuscript attached to the wall with an ornate dagger. He was wise enough to take a picture of it before taking it off the wall and pocketing it, which turned out well for him once the document disappeared before he could remove it from his pocket.

Before anyone brings it up: Yes, we are in questionable territory here. The list of possible deceptions here is quite long. The photograph may be doctored. The document could have been written

by any number of people, including outsiders. The document could be an illusion cast specifically to fool Wandering Horse. And so on.

Debating all that is not necessary, though. Regardless of the origin, the message exists, and it exists because someone involved in the Court's power games wants it to go out. The exact source can and should be debated, but the manuscript was deliberately inserted into the discussion, and so it is worthy of attention.

With that acknowledged, here is what the manuscript in Wandering Horse's possession says:

You cannot know what you seek.
The movement in the corner of your eye.
The mirage that disappears in a blink.
The measure of both location and velocity.
The forbidden book, the dark ritual, the rock covering the beetles and the twisting worms.
You cannot know the heart, the meat, the cartilage of the matter.
The matter evades.
Labels are given, careless, sloppy.
The game is the labels.
The game of names.
When you are already losing, you cannot win.

There you have it. I have my own thoughts and suppositions about some of the passages in this manuscript, but discussing them would be telling. In the games of the Court, it's best to use whatever lead you think you may have in your own private efforts, rather than give it away.

The Labyrinth Transcript: The Labyrinth of the Court has an evergreen appeal because its constantly changing nature means it can never be fully explored, and if there are new areas to uncover, there also might be new treasures awaiting the bold. Shadowrunners especially are susceptible to the lure of this place, which means the vast collection of rooms that is the Labyrinth usually has at least three or four runners in it somewhere, hoping to find something that will make them rich before they find something more than willing to eat them.

Runners are not the only ones there, though. Courtiers, especially ones knowledgeable about the secrets of this part of the keep, like to conduct meetings here for the privacy it offers. This mix of people proved serendipitous when an anonymous runner posted a transcript of a conversation they claimed to have overheard in the Labyrinth to one of the Denver Nexus' boards. It was met with great skepticism. While a few people have enjoyed pulling it apart and analyzing the secrets it contains, most have been dismissive.

Unfortunately for them, they don't know Glitch.

Yes, one of our fearless leaders recently hacked a *coimeádai* in the Court and found a conversation between two individuals that precisely matched the transcript posted on the Nexus. Even better, Glitch's information included the identity of the people involved in the conversation.

- Wait, Glitch, you've been to the Seelie Court?
- Slamm-0!

- A few times, yeah. I go for the pay, but I stay for the cardamom saffron cake.
- Glitch

One of the speakers is none other than Niall O'Connor, the distant and not always welcome cousin of the rulers of the Court. In the initial transcript, he was identified as Lenister. The other party is a man named Stuckey. He wears a tight black suit and a bow tie, and most distinctively a noose hangs around his neck. When asked about it, he flippantly says he was given it when he died and he hates to part with it, but most people take it as an open advertisement—one of the few that exists—that he is a member of the Hanged Man faction.

This identification alone is enough to get the attention of most courtiers, as O'Connor and the Hanged Man are two of the most notorious disrupters of Court order. In this conversation, they are cagey in the way of conspirators—they keep their references oblique, and they do not refer directly to any action they specifically intend to take. Still, one can't read this without the feeling that some bombshell lurks under the surface of this conversation, if only the whole thing could be understood. Perhaps you might be the one to understand it. Here it is.

O'CONNOR: Thank you for meeting me. I'm glad you were able to find this spot.
STUCKEY: What good am I if I don't know my way through a maze?
O'CONNOR: A Theseus, eh? Then like so many other heroes, beware of your Medea.
STUCKEY: The dead are the last people who need to be warned of danger.
O'CONNOR: True. Of course, the not-really-dead complicate matters.

STUCKEY: Indeed. Pretenders. False claimants.
O'CONNOR: Hiding from the truth.
STUCKEY: Who can blame them? Mímir spoke the truth, and they cut off his head.
O'CONNOR: Though he continued speaking the truth even after that.
STUCKEY: Admirable persistence. Though not all have an Odin willing and able to preserve them.
O'CONNOR: Fine, truth is dangerous. That makes it a weapon. How shall it be wielded?
STUCKEY: Gently. It is one of the few weapons that can cause more damage with shallower cuts.
O'CONNOR: How do you feel about Paris and London?
STUCKEY: Well. It is a positive example to follow.
O'CONNOR: But in all of this, the how is as important as the what.
STUCKEY: In all such cases, truth is best established by finding a believer. Or making one.
O'CONNOR: A believer is already at the forefront.
STUCKEY: The heart of the opportunity. The extent of belief, both now and in the future, is the question and the risk.
O'CONNOR: Down the river with Marlow we go.
STUCKEY: With the proper story for the widow.
O'CONNOR: Or widows.

There you have it. Interpret as you will.

You may ask, with this transcript, why Hanged Man was not listed as a faction of interest in the trial in the previous section. There are two principal reasons: 1) It is still not entirely clear that Stuckey is a member of the Hanged Man faction. The noose he wears may just be an affectation (and yes, I am aware just how weird that sentence sounds). 2) Even if the Hanged Man is involved, their motives remain as obtuse as ever. The discussion about their involvement essentially starts and ends here.

- Look, Hanged Men are poo-flinging monkeys. They see targets, and they start chucking. They don't always have a concerted plan. They just look to disrupt.
- Haze

- That's the type of error that can lead to swinging from your own noose. Gallows are high, lending a perspective that might allow the individuals at those heights to see more than others. When you do not understand what they do, it is well to ask where the fault lies.
- Man-of-Many-Names

IN CONCLUSION

Now you know the basics of this situation. The next step will be an open hearing, likely coming right after Morning Hearings. It's possible it will be announced well in advance. It's possible it won't. Either way, when it happens, word will spread quickly, and those who know they need to be there will arrive quickly.

The precise timing will depend on the mood of Lady Brane Deigh, and she will base her decision on the preparation of critical parties, herself being most critical of all. Vyperalyn is very busy gathering information, and the construction of the evening banquets is geared toward making interesting combinations whose conversations will provide interesting fodder for the trial.

I don't know what the trial will reveal, but I can tell you this: No matter how much preparation is put in, no matter how much people think they know about what will happen, there will be moments that will stun everyone in the room, if only because so many players in the game are dedicated to make such moments happen. I don't know what the outcome will be. I just know that it will be one of those clear dividing lines in the Court, where people talk about the way the Court was before, and the way it is after.

I can't wait to see.

- Don't forget that the Lady Deigh has powerful earthly allies in Tír na nÓg who can do some of her heavy lifting for her. This can not only help her, but also Higher Power, who have substantial monetary investments on our plane. The ability to buy allies, or purchase reagents, or support research into new spell formulae, can help swing things in the Court.
- Winterhawk

- The Black Lodge, who hates the Court's connection to our world, especially the Tír, also has substantial resources.
- Frosty

REVELATIONS

I still can't believe this all started with some wage slaves playing hooky.

Well, it's *slightly* more complicated than that. For most wage slaves, repeated absences mean getting fired, not investigated by shadowrunners. But strip away the details, and that's how this began—a few people not showing up for work too many times.

You wouldn't think a job like that would end with your teammates dead and your *fundamental understanding of the universe ripped to fraggin' shreds!*

And yet, here I am.

I'll tell you what happened. I'll tell it straight. You have to believe me.

My name is Wotan. That's not my real name, obviously, but that's what my colleagues in the shadows call me. Until recently, I was part of a four-person team operating out of Detroit. Myself, Scalpel, PinRam and (bear with me here) Party Ninja—that was our team. We were pretty damn good at what we did, despite the occasional ridiculous nickname, so the city's big players knew our reputation.

That reputation was probably what led Ares' home office to hire us for what sounded like a nice, easy job several weeks ago. Apparently, four of their wage mages had started acting a bit weird in the previous couple of weeks—missing a lot of work with no explanation, crappy output when they did show up, that sort of thing. What with wage mages being rare and valuable resources, Ares didn't want to just can them, so they hired us to look into things.

Our initial recon didn't turn up much. Party Ninja ... you know what? I'm just going to call him Ninja from now on so I don't facepalm myself to death before I finish, okay?

Where was I? Oh, right—our initial recon. Anyways, Ninja went over the targets' uploaded work logs , which turned up nothing. Nor did their personal histories reveal much; they all seemed to be typical ThD eggheads. Our next move was visiting at least one of their houses for a little B&E work, and that's when things started to get interesting.

We decided to hit the house of the one mage who didn't have a family in order to minimize potential complications. Getting in wasn't a problem—all it took were a few good maintenance worker disguises, breaking in while he was at work, and Ninja's stealthy hacking skills.

Aside from being way nicer than anything I could ever dream of owning, the place seemed like a normal house at first. We didn't find anything noteworthy until we searched the library, where we found a commlink (not his Ares-issued one) on the table next to the reading chair. I had a feeling we might find some clues in there, so I gave it to Ninja, who cracked its defenses in minutes. Frag, was my hunch ever right.

Most of the most recent files on that thing were recruitment and informational e-booklets from an organization I'd never heard of, named The Brotherhood of the Key, and their contents creeped me out. They described the organization as a magical initiatory group, but the language used in them was pretty out there, talking about drek like "Communing with the Gatekeeper so that your soul may reach the stars" (that's a direct quote). Other recent additions included some files labeled "Daily Devotions to the Gatekeeper." Those seemed to be rituals of some kind, but their incantations were in a language I can only describe as meaningless jumbles of letters.

The commlink also contained a schedule of the group's "devotional gatherings" for the year. On a hunch, we cross-referenced those dates with the information Mr. Johnson gave us; sure enough, we quickly deduced that this particular mage had been missing work in order to attend these meetings. Unfortunately, we had no luck determining who sent any of these files—that data had been expertly wiped.

At this point, we had the information we needed, but as usual my curiosity got the better of me. I had a feeling those daily devotions were meant to be performed at home, and I wanted to see what the ritual space looked like. So we headed for the most convenient spot in the house to set up such a space: the basement.

We found what we were looking for, but what we saw definitely didn't help my unease. The basic elements were familiar to me—a ritual circle, an altar, stuff like that. But the symbols drawn in the circle were flat-out *weird;* I'd never even heard of anything like them, much less seen them.

And the blood-red marble statue on the altar ... damn, I'm shivering just remembering it. It was an exquisitely detailed piece that looked like a large, roiling sphere, with multiple appendages branching out from it and terminating at smaller, similarly tempestuous spheres orbiting the large one. It was the first two elements that disturbed me, because while my rational mind could see that they depicted a star with streams of plasma erupting from it, something about how they were sculpted suggested to my subconscious mind a gargantuan mass of cancerous flesh—a vicious tumor with ropy tentacles of viscera.

The fact that the tentacles seemed to be in streaming motion every time I didn't look at them directly didn't help.

After that, we decided to contact Mr. Johnson to update him and ask for advice on how to proceed. He seemed angriest over the fact that his company's pet spellworms had "betrayed their oaths to Ares" by joining an out-of-corp initiatory group. In the interests of keeping other wage mages from getting similar ideas, he ordered us to capture the four targets alive while inflicting as much damage as possible to the group. That seemed a bit beyond our original agreement, but he sweetened the deal with a hefty bonus.

Our plan for phase two of the job was to find the group's meeting place, break in and plant surveillance devices, do some recon, and then attack their next big gathering. The first part wasn't difficult; the address was in the commlink Ninja hacked. It turned out to be a big house in the rich part of town, so we knew we'd have to deal with some serious security, both electronic and magical.

We decided to wait for a day when all four of our targets were at work to break in, casing the house while we waited. Ninja felt confident that he could beat the electronic security, tight though it was. On the magical side, I saw some pretty powerful wards guarding the house, but nothing I couldn't handle as long as we didn't linger too long.

A few days later, we made our move. Getting in was just as challenging as I thought it would be, but it went off without a hitch. Still, I ordered everyone to stay alert, just in case.

It's a good thing, too, because everything after the entry was a pure shit show.

As soon as we closed the front door, they jumped us. "They" being the wage mages we'd been tracking. All four of 'em. Even though Mr. Johnson had said just minutes earlier that he saw them sitting at their desks, even though I astrally scanned the house on the way in and didn't find *anything*, there they fraggin' were, shooting at us from ambush points.

Ninja bought it first. Dodged the shots fired at him, but a second later that same mage was behind him, driving a sword through his heart. When I say that, I don't mean he moved too fast for my eyes to see. I mean I literally saw him in front of Ninja one moment and behind him the next.

The bastard *teleported*! I *know* that's impossible, but I can't deny what I saw with my own eyes; hell, his fraggin' aura blinked out of existence along with his body!

I didn't think twice before frying that prick with a powerbolt. Frag bringing him in alive; it was four against three, and the odds needed to be evened up.

Scalpel was next. Popped his spurs the second the fight started and went to town like he always did, striking with more speed and precision than anyone would expect from a troll his size. Managed to bag one of the cultists too; hamstrung him, but had to slice his throat to keep him from teleporting away. A second later, one of the cultists teleported behind Scalpel and decapitated him with a single axe swing.

PinRam didn't miss a beat, launching a magically enhanced jump kick at Scalpel's killer only to miss when he teleported. She anticipated that though, kicking the fragger so hard when he reappeared that he ended up embedded in a wall. It didn't save her, though—as she went to knock him out, he set off the biggest powerball I've ever seen at point-blank range. Ripped them both apart and slammed me and the last mage into two different walls. Melted some of the wall, too, by the looks of the dripping paneling.

I recovered before he did, and hit him with the strongest stunbolt I could in the hope of salvaging something out of this mess. Bad idea—he keeled over dead as soon as the bolt hit him. He must have been hurt worse by the blast than I'd thought.

The next thing I remember is kneeling on the foyer floor, staring blankly at the carnage. I must've blacked out, because my commlink said several minutes had passed.

I searched the house in a daze, grabbing any materials I could find that seemed cult-related. Found their big meeting spot in the basement, too; it had a huge ritual circle with the same weird symbols in it, a larger version of the same creepy red statue at the circle's center ... I didn't want to see more. Once I'd gathered what I could, I torched the place with some petrol and a lighter.

Frankly, I'm amazed I made it back to my team's safehouse. I still don't remember doing it.

I came to several hours later on one of the safehouse's beds. The sleep had done nothing to help my shellshock; I must have stared at the walls for an hour after waking up, trying to figure out what the frag I was supposed to do.

What I wanted to do was call Mr. Johnson, arrange a meeting, turn over what I'd collected, slam the door on this FUBAR job, and take a nice long vacation to clear my head.

That's what I *wanted*. But I knew what I *needed* were answers. My friends were dead, and I'd just seen a fundamental law of magic *snapped like a twig before my eyes*. I *had* to know what was going on here.

So I started looking through the books I'd lifted from the cult house, focusing on two that caught my eye— one titled the Tome of Revelations, the other an untitled one that looked like a grimoire. I flipped through the grimoire first, but that got me nowhere; it was all in the same weird language as the daily devotions' incantations.

The Tome of Revelations I could at least read the words of, but its contents were no more comprehensible. It was obviously penned by the cult itself and apparently was intended to be a constantly updated record of what they'd learned from their patron (the subject of those statues), referred to interchangeably as both the Gatekeeper and ... Ash-Shuthath, if I remember the spelling correctly.

The first section was a glossary of sorts, containing translations of that weird language used in the grimoire, which they called "the language of Ancients." However, they also claimed that any human rendering of the language, whether in voice or writing, was doomed to be imperfect at best.

That turned out to be the *least* strange of the book's three sections.

The second section was the kind of stuff that might have left me spellbound if it were escapist science fiction and not the holy text of some psychos who'd just killed my friends. It claimed to be "divine knowledge," as revealed to the cultists through visions from Ash-Shuthath. Most of it was too crazy to print here, but it did at least answer some of my lesser questions. Though answers are difficult to glean from letters that are constantly writhing, trying to escape.

According to these writings, Ash-Shuthath is old, older than old, more ancient than everything we know—our world, our ideas, our sense of order. It is not alone, there are other ancient beings whose location is meaningless to describe, because they exist beyond our conceptions of space. They can be on Earth because they can be everywhere, they can be nowhere, they are and they are not. They swim in a limitless ocean of power, it is native to them, it flows around them and drips off of them, and

there are people who follow them, who worship them, hoping that perhaps the smallest drip will fall on them and change their reality. Followers like The Brotherhood view Ash-Shuthath as the governor of travel between the stars and metaplanes, the divine source of *all* knowledge, the mediator between the real and unreal, if indeed there is anything that can be called real.

It was bizarre. And hypnotic. I couldn't understand it, I couldn't turn away.

My first instinct was to scoff, to hide behind the comfortable shield of unbelief. There was no way this could possibly be true, I thought. These guys were obviously cracked if they'd *believed* this drek.

But every time I tried to laugh it off, I thought of the fight, the phasing into and out of reality of our enemies, the speed at which they moved. How everything I did seemed slow and heavy, and everything they did seemed excited by a light I had never before seen and could not possibly describe. They did the impossible, and they did it habitually. It was their reality. My reality had always been wrong.

I read on. I should not have. There were warnings in my head telling me not to go on, not to learn more. But wasn't that just the fear of complacency? The terror of shedding what I thought I knew? Couldn't I sacrifice complacency to greater truth?

In the final section I learned rituals, spells never dreamed of contained in languages I did not know existed. I had no knowledge of how to pronounce the words, but I heard them in my head anyway, and they had the tones of deep bells and distant thunder. It told me of entering forbidden locations, making the wealth of the world flow to you, finding spots and items of hidden power. Power built in my head like electricity flowing to a capacitor.

Then the book turned from ritual to narrative. It told a story, a tale of shadowrunners breaking into a house and encountering the cultists that waited for them. It described the fight in detail, particularly focusing on how the cultists could anticipate the moves of the shadowrunners, and what they could do to end the fight as quickly as possible. It was the fight that had killed my team, and it was there in perfect detail. When was this written? Was it prophecy? Transcription? Either answer seemed impossible. But there it was, in wriggling writing before my eyes.

Divination doesn't work like that—never has, never will!

First teleportation, now completely flawless auguries ... how could they have twisted the fraggin' DNA of magic like this?!

I swore then and there not to stop until I found the answer, even if it killed me.

Armed with the translations from the Tome of Revelations, I returned to the grimoire and began furiously reading through its contents, starting with the formula for the teleportation spell. Unfortunately, while I was able to read the words, I couldn't make any sense of the formula, even after calming myself down and studying it for hours. The elements didn't come together in any way I could figure out, the words would not stay still, yet my own eyes had told me that it worked. It was like reading a math textbook that told me two plus two equaled seven, and while I'd seen firsthand that it indeed could, I couldn't quite figure out *how*.

It was only then that something occurred to me: I was in the wrong mindset to find the answers I sought. I had to get into the cultists' heads, see as they saw, in order to gain their knowledge and analyze it.

I soon found out how to do just that.

Among the grimoire's contents was a ritual they used to initiate new members, called "Peering Through the Gates," which supposedly gave its recipient "A glimpse of the truth of the universe, that they may begin their journey." I knew immediately that this was the key to the answers I sought, the answers I *needed*!

I drew the circle to the grimoire's specifications, using the same strange, alien symbols I'd seen in the cultists' ritual circles. I chanted the incantation in that foul, unpronounceable language, beseeching the Gatekeeper to bestow upon me the smallest glimpse of the universe's true face.

The things I saw! Wonderful, terrible things!

Dread, timeless kingdoms beneath the waves ... life made in no god's image among the heavenly spheres ... Oedipus at the universe's core! No laws, no reason, no divinity, no soul, no plan, *no meaning*!

I awoke four days later in the middle of the ritual circle. A puddle of drool lay near my head, I had the worst stomach cramps of my life on account of it being completely empty, and my mouth was as dry as Death Valley.

I didn't care one bit about any of those things. Infinitely more important things now occupied my mind, along with a zeal that filled every cell of my being!

You see, upon awakening I remembered everything I saw in the brief moment I looked into the universe's eyes and peered into its soul. And from that knowledge, a revelation was born: *everything* metahumanity thinks it knows about the universe is a lie! Our understanding of the cosmos, the astral plane, even our physical world is like that of an infant! We arrogantly think we have quantified so much of our little corner of the universe, but not only is that little corner an insignificant speck in the grand scheme of things, everything we thought we knew about that pathetic pebble is bulldrek!

And now that I know all this, I must know more!

Part of me is angry at myself for having wasted so much of my limited lifespan following the shared delusions of ignorant fools, but I have *so* much lost time to make up for, and regret would only waste more of it.

It's funny, really. I undertook this investigation to find answers, only to *finally*, at long last, find the questions worth asking!

And I will learn the answers to those questions–*all* of them–at the knee of Ash-Shuthath!

FOLLOWERS OF THE ELDER GOD

FRAGMENTS OF BEYOND

- We discussed the worship of so-called Elder Gods in the *Forbidden Arcana* download, but we didn't have a lot of clarity on what they are up to. Or about. Or a lot of things. We have more information collected here, but this is not a group given to clear mission statements or any kind of transparency.

  For starters, we received a data dump of files from Nightstalker (a.k.a. Martin de Vries, everyone's favorite vampire who hunts his own), which he claims to have purloined from an Ordo Maximus lab's data vault. It's not my usual forte, and de Vries is arguably insane, but a few people looked it over and felt it was worth posting here. Take a scan and see what you think.
- Glitch

- Calling de Vries obsessive or paranoid is a massive understatement.
- Hannibelle

- Given what he's been through, who can blame him? And honestly, who are any of us to cast the first stone when it comes to sanity?
- Netcat

- Any chance we can get the rest of the files? These look cherrypicked.
- Clockwork

- That's a good point, Glitch. Are we getting the cream of the crop or the dregs at the bottom of the cup? What de Vries isn't showing us is as important as what he is.
- Old Crow

- I believe the contents of the files speak for themselves. It is clear that these particular files share a theme, and if I know de Vries, he's sharing because he wants more eyes on this activity. If reliable, this stuff is danger level: alpha.
- Glitch

- Did you just make that up? "Danger level: alpha?" Drama queen.
- Clockwork

- Yes, I made it up, but you will see I'm not being dramatic.
- Glitch

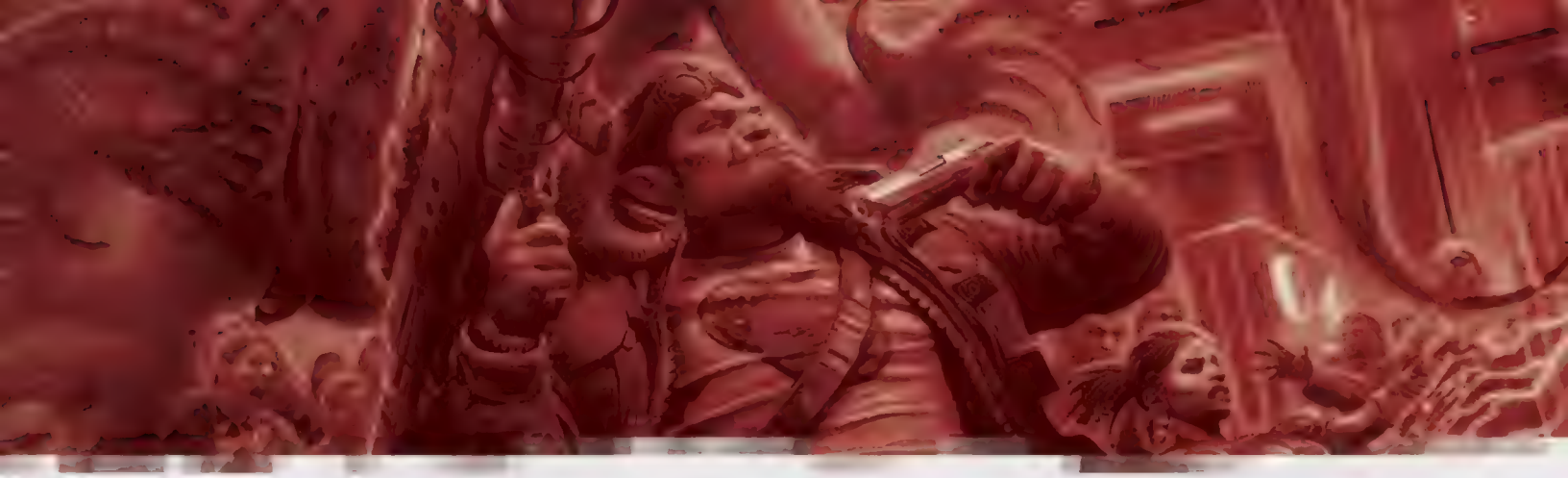
PROJECT BELLA DETESTA MATRIBUS: UPDATE

INITIATE MORDREN REPORTING

We suspect the Askat excavation is nearly complete (see attached gridwork with mapping details). From the dross, we have documented the discovery of no fewer than three focus items of varying magnitude and potency, two of which were marked as such nearly without the need for astral confirmation, given their refusal to rot and rust alongside the rubbish found around them; recalcitrance against entropy is ever a sign of power, as we are, of course, both aware and example of.

- Askat's a quiet little village. I stopped in there to refuel a few times, running goods along the Katun river.
- Red Anya

The spearhead (see attachment) shows tremendous potential upon astral investigation, but the shaft was ravaged by time. The implication is that just the tip holds the power, and shafts were expected to give in to damage while the weapon outlasted them; perhaps some manner of cavalry lance? It bears several of the hallmarks of elvish craftsmanship in complete accordance with our own files and those harvested from compromised Draco Foundation data havens; it is light, uncannily sharp, and seems to hold a pure enchantment of basic martial puissance (note that the attached file is not in error; the length of the shaft prior to deterioration is estimated at little over forty centi-



meters, and the spearhead itself is scaled appropriately, but we are certain this was no arrow).

- Compromised Draco Foundation data havens, huh? You really think you can beat our Matrix nerds, vampires?
- Thorn

The amber orb (see attachment) and associated silverwork has resisted the ages almost unscathed, implying a more coherent item was crafted and that the enchantments were placed upon both the hollow orb and the attaching metal all at once. The general shape implies a tiara or crown of some sort, but closer inspection shows this not to be the case. Rather, the silver is more like the strap of an eyepatch; the way the orb intrudes within the ring created, our conclusion is that this was an implant of some sort, though no simple optical replacement! Lab results are as of yet inconclusive at recognizing the film left within the orb (inserted via an almost invisible hole; see attachment). Astral observation, meanwhile, shows that the orb is uncannily active outside the physical plane. Subaltern-Initiate Septimus ranted about the orb "staring back at him" before tranquilizers were necessary (see attachment). It may be a metaphysical conduit of some sort, not unlike certain summoning foci, but further study will be necessary. Subaltern-Initiate Septimus has expressed a shameful willingness to volunteer as an implantation subject. His eagerness to redeem himself from his unseemly outburst is commendable, but the Change may yet elude him if his emotions continue to hold such sway. I must admit to a certain sense of excitement, however. What wonders might he see if we are able to affix the orb appropriately? What tales might he tell of the feeling of its insertion? Our next find calls to me to assist in the application myself, but I digress.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly to your own research, we have the knife (see attachment). Double-edged and appearing to be a weapon, not merely a tool, the knife has not in any way given in to the ravages of time (though the sheath did, given traces of organic matter found near it; see attachment). The handle is crafted of wood, note, but both it and the seemingly simple cord wrapping are unmolested by the ages (though note the bloodstains; see attachment). This blade seemingly holds no power in and of itself, even upon astral inspection it contained no clear enchantments of the sort modern foci nor ancient artifacts commonly hold (in regard to keenness, blade strength, or the like). Instead we were left with merely—and pardon my unscientific term—an aftertaste. A dark and potent one. We have found similar astral residue on artifacts before, and, as aware as I am of the Belarus Incident, we have little wish to proceed directly here on-site. A proper sealed laboratory will be needed for further inspection before I might speak with any certainty, but if you'll forgive me a bit of extrapolation, I believe we've uncovered something not entirely unlike Artifact Secundus Delta Seventeen; I have not inspected that axe-head in some years, but the aura of this knife reminded me of that cruder blade.

- It's not impossible for items crafted by the same enchanter to share a bit of a signature, something like a magical "maker's mark." But it's also not very common.
- Winterhawk

Subaltern-Initiate Camilla spoke out of turn, and I applied the knife to her (see attachment) to test my theory. Unlike with such experiments performed with SD17, she bled profusely (see attachment) and there was no visible change to the blade, unlike with the crystal-work in SD17. Further testing upon Subaltern-Initiates Gaius and Augustus, carried out while both were ensorcelled into wildly differing emotional states than Camilla, produced no visibly different results (see attachment). I remain convinced this knife is somehow linked

to that axe, however different the enchantments themselves may be. There are things woven about this knife, even if not woven into this knife, and those strands lead to places as dark and potent as SD17 did—I stake my reputation on it. Perhaps both weapons were forged by the same smith? Enchanted by the same creator, for different means? May both of them have been used at one point against the same creature (despite the difference in their locations of discovery and excavation)?

I must know.

Further testing is required, and I would be remiss if I did not see it through. In the interest of preserving this expedition's resources, I will conduct future experiments upon the simpletons of Askat rather than my fellow researchers.

- Frag. He did it. I made some calls. More than a hundred people died. The Upravleniye Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti and other Russian intelligence agencies killed the media reports, but someone committed mass, mass, murder in Askat recently, and took their bodies with them.
- Red Anya

I do hereby submit a formal request for parameters and guidelines to be sent, with all due haste, granting me an allowance based on the village's population. I must be thorough—the blade calls to me to spill blood. As the patron of this excavation, it falls to you to determine how many subjects I may test it upon. Respond as quickly as possible, I pray thee. I am eager to begin, and the long nights here both grant me ample time for experimentation and an all-too-familiar sense of boredom that is as eager to be sated as I am. Merely say the word, mistress, and the blade and I alike will drink of them deeply.

- Magic knives don't make people do this, do they? Just magic crazy? Or regular-old crazy?
- Slamm-0!

- Mundane psychosis exacerbated by HMHVV and rampant egomania are more likely than it having much to do with the knife (or that axe), yes. It's possible for magic items to pick up distasteful affinities from prolonged usage in sinister acts (I've heard rumors about scalpels), but for an item as old as this fellow seems to think this knife is to maintain any such magical echo, it would have had to be a potent artifact, indeed. Or it would need to somehow be tied in a very strong ritualistic sense to a very, very powerful extraplanar entity.
- Winterhawk

PROJECT NOX LILITU: ONGOING

GRAF MANNHEIM, FIFTH DEGREE MAGUS SUPERVISING

It is no small thing to be tasked with such a mystery as the self. This is, in my opinion, the highest form of our Grand Undertaking, and thus, I am aware of the import and prestige which comes with this opportunity. I shall not be found wanting.

I cannot, however, say the same for my specimens.

Subject Alef is, frankly, of inferior stock. I question the validity of utilizing Krieger scum to find a comparative baseline with such exceptional metagenetic complexity and elegance as Sanguisuga or, to a lesser extent, Vrykolakiviridae. Spotting the differences is infinitely simpler than the similarities, partially because the *only* similarity is in the base expression, itself. The vectors and mechanics are so vastly different as to defy the notion of a commonality, at all. We really should see about revisions to the academic umbrella terminology of Ghilani in literature.

- Sweet fuck, this guy is up his own ass.
- Haze

- Well, that's just academics in general.
- Winterhawk

- Okay, I recognized a few terms in there. We're talking about the Infected.
- Lyran

- He's saying ghouls don't deserve to be classified alongside vampires and nosferatu.
- Doc Fangs

I digress. Alef is male, human origin, mid-thirties, sixty-three kilograms, South African Boer descent. Appearance standard for Krieger strain. No cyberware or Awakened aptitudes. Membership in 162 ghoul community. Has been supplied with modified ghoul flesh as sole sustenance. Modification masks olfactory and metaphysical telltales of infection to prevent the subject from raising any objections to this form of "metacannibalism." Diet has proceeded for one lunar cycle without abating or meal variety, resulting in a higher concentration of Krieger-optimized nutrients and suspected LILITU presence.

- Oh, fuck … I think I know where this is going …
- Hannibelle

- What?
- Red

Alef has not, as yet, manifested any signs of LILITU magnification: negative amplification of sensitivities, appetites, or genetic variance. Will continue application and broaden subject base for cross-verification. I will need a new batch of Asamando ex-pats posthaste, preferably in several groups of thirty, each corresponding to similar traits (e.g., weight, sex, metagenetic expression). If not, make more the old-fashioned way. We'll certainly need more yet to maintain their Ouroboran diet.

- They're studying the effects of ghoul cannibalism. They're planning for when Asamando implodes from a lack of feedstock. Oh, God …
- Hannibelle

- What possible use could that serve? And what the fuck is LILITU?
- Lyran

- I don't know for sure, but it might be their name for the change that overcame the Infected a few years ago. Infected didn't mutate so much or so easily, and they had less pronounced appetites and vulnerabilities. They might be seeing whether there is any metagenetic adaptation from cannibalism.
- Doc Fangs

- Can ghouls really eat each other?
- Gillette

- We can, but we prefer not to. Some infected like Martin de Vries prefer to feed on their own kind. You'd think they would just hunt his ass down and see what's happening to him; he's been doing it for decades.
- Hannibelle

- They've been hunting him for just as long, without any luck. Only FTD had any success when they outed him a couple years back.
- /dev/grrl

SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT

I may have been premature in my dismissal of the Krieger strain. They may yet be of some use, after all.

Having received my shipment of subjects and feedstock (and quite promptly, as well; I am most impressed), I expanded Subject Alef into Subject Group Alef, and established Groups Bet, Gimel, Dalet, and He. Each is established along similar baselines to simplify identification of LILITU manifestations and isolate factors which seem to invoke a response more readily than previous attempts. While seemingly inconsequential, the placement of the groups in close proximity to one another (adjacent three-meter-by-five-meter cells arranged in a half-circle along the perimeter of the lab, taking one floor of PILLAR 2 in total) bore out remarkable, and unforeseen, results.

After another month on concentrated meta-cannibalistic nutrients, Group Alef began to exhibit strange, isolated cases of synchronicity. Note that each cell door is made of unidirectional-visibility plasteel and warded, with three centimeters of lead lining embedded in the surrounding concrete, isolating every subject in every sense possible. Subjects Alef 6 and 22 both twitched in the exact same manner at the exact same time for thirty-two seconds before diverging actions. Neither seemed to think this was strange, and both had full memory of the incident. Later, Subjects Alef 12, 13, and 14 each sat on their cots and began whispering the same words for three minutes. While I am still waiting for an external verification or translation, the words spoken do not, as far as I can find, exist in any known language. When questioned, each said it just came to them and they felt like sitting and speaking gibberish. Again, no loss of memory, and no knowing loss of volition. Interesting.

Sleep recordings showed groups would speak in random clusters in their sleep, again the unidentified language. I have decided to pursue this course. Dietary intake is increased and encouraged. Most have been hungry for so long they are happy to quell the Hunger in such a complete fashion.

SUPPLEMENTAL REPORT

INITIATE KALUS REPORTING FOR GRAF MANNHEIM

Dietary intake increase proceeded for twelve days before incident earlier today, resulting in loss of Group Alef and facility PILLAR 2.

At 12:41 local time, Group Alef simultaneously turned toward Graf Mannheim as he was walking the round. Each appeared to be watching him through the glass, despite the impossibility of this. Their eyes all exhibited phosphorescent qualities akin to extreme emotional or metaphysical exertion in Ghilani strains, but unlike standard Wichtiviridae, their eyes were a uniform purple and lacked surface volume. Astral observation seemed to indicate some kind of astral rift reflected in them, streaming and smoking with the violet energy.

Graf Mannheim looked up from his datapad to see them watching him. He seemed alarmed. His mouth was opening to speak when they spoke as one to him through the cell comm speakers, which should have been impossible.

"You aren't supposed to be looking, Albert."

They each held up one finger and slowly shook it in a chastising manner. Graf Mannheim was facing away from me at the time, but his arms went limp and he began swaying in time with their gesture. I entered the elevator, having connected my IR links to security. The doors were closing as Mannheim turned to look at me. His eyes were violet, as well. He was smiling. I don't think it was him.

Security reports all cameras in the room cut out and power fluctuations were reported radiating from the Alef lab. I managed to make it past quarantine in mist form and escaped up the shaft before the elevator stalled and fell to the bottom of the complex. I was the last to leave the facility before containment protocols activated the seismic charges and sent the PILLAR down into the sea rift.

THEORETICAL POSTULATION

LADY RUSTAKOV
HIGH MAGUS SUBMITTING

Kalus is now under observation. Mortal security has been liquidated. Activate Phase 2 at PILLAR 8 with increased security precautions and cyber-zombie enforcement. Record all relevant data for Asamando PROJECT PROMETHEUS.

- Okay, wait, wait ... they were feeding ghouls other ghouls to ... what?
- Slamm-0!

- Concentrate whatever they think is in us?
- Red

- Very good, Richard.
- Mamelu

- Who is she?
- Butch

- A friend. Don't stop, you're doing well.
- Mamelu

- They called it Project Prometheus.
- Doc Fangs

- I mean, doesn't everyone have a Prometheus-something? Every single corp loves that word …
- Kia

- Yeah, but Ordo loves their poetic tie-ins. Like playing anagrams with celebrity names. Prometheus was the god who gave fire to man.
- Red

- He was also chained to Mt. Olympus.
- Doc Fangs

- Asamando is on the verge of a food crisis. If they run out of food and can't get out of the country, they'll turn on each other … holy shit.
- Hannibelle

- Are they … trying to summon it? Kill it?
- Slamm-0!

- The Ordo does not destroy what it can control. Or what it thinks it can control.
- Nightstalker

- Oh, God …
- Hannibelle

- I …
- Red

- **GUEST: NIGHTSTALKER HAS LOGGED OFF**

- He didn't try to trace either of you, if it makes you feel any better.
- Bull

- Bull, he's been eating Infected for decades. What if this is affecting him?
- Red

- Maybe it only works in concentrations? Like whole packs or large numbers?
- Lyran

- We gotta nuke Asamando.
- Sounder

- We gotta get rid of all the Infected. Why take a chance?
- Clockwork

- Hey—
- Hannibelle

- **USER BULL HAS TERMINATED CONNECTION**

THE PAGES

Official Name: Item 013, Item 076, Item 144 (all reclassified as Item 013)

Category: Discovered lore

Protocol: Do not read an individual page more than once per lunar cycle. Under no circumstance read multiple pages in one setting (see Incident Reports KC-02, KC-14, JY-9, and ZX-84). It is recommended that no sharp objects be near the reading location (see Incident KC-02 and the attached flensing notations).

- Flensing notations? Yeah, no, I'm good.
- Hard Exit

Description: Originally, each of these pages was believed to be from a separate source, due to differences in material and handwriting, but ongoing analysis has shown that they have been drawn from the same source. It seems that the author's decaying mental state led to the various handwriting samples. Item 144 is entirely in an unknown dialect, while the other samples are in English, albeit a rambling style. Partial mathematical formulae are scribbled in the margins; if the full tome could be reconstructed, it is thought that this formula could unlock an entirely new level of understanding. The Pages make reference to "She Who Thrives Beneath the Rot," with repeated references to beetles and earthworms. Centipedes have been sketched on two pages (076 and 144). Those who have read the latter pages have talked of the feeling of bugs crawling underneath their skin, strongly upon first reading, then lessening in intensity over the course of several days. Re-reading the page returns these feelings stronger than before and for a greater length of time.

BROWN SANITARIUM

Official Name: Location 096
Category: Discovered lore
Protocol: Research has barely begun, but at this time no adverse effects have been noted. Field research has proven difficult; purchase of the facility is impractical. Current consideration is for the walls in question to be dismantled and transported to a secure area.

Description: Brown Sanitarium was decommissioned roughly a century ago, having been originally constructed in Rhode Island in 1881 by the Brown family. The Browns lost their fortune in the Great Depression, and their home was donated to the State for use as a mental hospital, until closed in 1982. Long abandoned, we are uncertain when magical activity first began there; our earliest report dates to 2049 and true investigation didn't start until 2059. One secured room, Location 096, was found with extensive writing in an obscure dialect that we have yet to fully decipher (but we believe related to Sperethiel). Three of the four walls are covered in this writing, a combination of blood and fecal matter the occupant must have used until their death, while the fourth is a triangular pattern with a complicated spiral pattern inside. We believe that this might be an astral gateway whose operation is encoded in the writing, but research is ongoing.

Personal addition: The difficult part will be the care that must be taken in the disassembly and re-assembly. It's possible that the facing of the potential portal must be exact to align the gateway. Joining our end to an unknown area is ill-advised.

THE WATCH

Official Name: Item 017
Category: Magical artifact
Protocol: If discovered, store in a secure area with no interaction with metahuman auras. Contact superiors for pickup.

Description: The Watch is a golden pocket watch manufactured in London, England, circa 1880, notable for the engraving (H. E. Pennymore) engraved on the rear and for the hourglass design on the cover. It's an obviously mastercrafted timepiece that still needs regular winding, and it keeps excellent time. It also bonds with the astral energies of one person, treating them as a host, while simultaneously draining astral energies from others in proximity. This energy, in return, is used to produce minor magical effects for the attuned, in essence making them lucky, while others in their life gradually suffer misfortune, take ill, or waste away from an unknown disease. Eventually the attuned comes to realize that the watch is the source for both their good fortune and the woes of their friends and family and will remove the watch from their life. The Watch has passed through our hands twice, but each time someone has tested it out, begun the process, and aborted the procedure when the consequences began to be known. Currently, the Watch is in the wild—we must not lose it a third time!

Notes: There have been reports of the Watch being destroyed, either melted it down, crushed with a hammer, or flung into a chasm or the ocean. Either the Watch can reform itself and somehow call to be found, or there are multiple watches in circulation.

CRAWLERS

Official Name: Otherspecies 02
Category: Astral mutation
Protocol: Standard astral barriers can keep them contained and idle, but exposure to humanoid astral signatures sends them into a chittering excitement. They are unable to affect the material world in any way but swarm a target all the same, slavering with a primal need. Astral forms are assaulted with a devouring intent—do not approach Crawlers without assistance! Magical fire seems to keep them at bay, but if hungry enough, they will advance regardless. Mana barriers are mandatory!

Description: Twice the size of a human, these mutated spirits are a blend of beetle and spider, but rather than legs, they possess eight hairy tentacles. As with other spirits, the illusion of their movement (a slithering translocation) is actually flight, so they make no sound when moving. When within four meters of prey, they instead leap in a tentacle-splayed manner that ensures that they can wrap their limbs around a target. Once the target is held tightly, they display three mouths behind their mandibles and begin to feed. Interestingly, they possess only three eyes, with the central one being more lizard-like, while the remaining two are shockingly human. Notes recovered in Aztlan suggest that Crawlers are created in some way from spirits of man, but as of this time, we have not uncovered this technique. Rediscovering this technique is rated an Alpharius Centa-

rum priority! The number of Crawlers is otherwise both finite and dwindling.

GUM TOADS

Official Name: Otherspecies 04
Category: Astral entity
Protocol: While Gum Toads have only been observed in the astral, their ectoplasmic excretions gradually cross into the material world, leaving a slimy residue behind, notable for having a consistency on par with flypaper while smelling like mildew. (Experimentation with this residue can be found under file "Ecto-Mortar" for those with Clarity access.) This signature effect has led to them being gathered in fair number. Gum Toads are docile in most instances and, if left in a dimly lit room, are content to simply reside there, idly snacking on whatever spiritual energy passes through moving only when left unfed for a full lunar cycle. Small spiritual forms are as attractive to them as flies to a frog: All Members are under the strongest advisement to keep all ally spirits away from Gum Toad containment areas! Gum Toads have a particular affinity for wild spirits and will sometimes motivate themselves to move in gradual pursuit of these morsels. Proper warding will keep such temptation at bay.

Description: Nearly the size of a cow, these morbidly obese toads are covered in thick layers of excretions with a thickness on par with tar. Gum toads ooze this material at a rate of roughly a liter a day in ordinary conditions, but when the toad is excited, this flow can increase greatly. (Ongoing observation shows that a Gum Toad can run dry if left unfed for a full lunar cycle, at which time they become quite active in predation. Once sufficient astral energy has been consumed, they return to a lethargic, and leaking, state.) Gum Toads have a tongue approximately seven meters long that they can fire with a sharpshooter's eye and astounding speed, drawing prey into their mouth. Interestingly, they rarely chew prey, instead using their forelegs to hold it in place, then coat it with a combination of drool and excretions, pinning them to a surface where they can be devoured at their leisure, usually when an astral form begins to dissipate.

(Grand Brewer Sanchez of Locutus Five indicates that a significant volume of Gum ectoplasm fed into a power site will not only aspect it, but can create a breeding pool for Gum Toads. Unfortunately, these fresh toads are no more useful as foot soldiers than those discovered in the wild; the only true use of them is to create more corrupted power sites. He requests additional funding for further study and asks other areas also explore this phenomenon, believing that, perhaps, they can be linked together. Even if his theory proves fruitless, denying these power sites to rival organizations could prove useful.)

SIN-EATERS

Official Name: Otherspecies 09
Category: Astral entity
Protocol: Sin-Eaters have a unique ability to communicate to the material world. These communications are extremely quiet, whispers that only a single person can hear inside their mind, but astral-originated energy entering the material world in any way is highly unusual. Mana barriers and wards can keep this communication at bay, but mundane exposure should be minimized at all times: Sin-Eaters are as cunning as they are weak and are highly adept at manipulating the weak-willed.

Description: Each Sin-Eater is a small, thin shadow of a humanoid creature, like a shriveled husk of a metahuman mummy. They tend to a monochrome grey shade but attain a healthier shine while feeding. Of note is that a Sin-Eater that has eaten its fill may continue to eat, at which point it grows a distended stomach to hold excess energy. While the leading theory is that they store this energy for dry periods between feedings, some research suggests that they can transport it and deliver it to other astral entities. What they gain for this "bucket feeding" is, at this time, unknown.

It should be noted that Sin-Eaters only feed on negative metahuman emotions and that, furthermore, we have identified seven subspecies, each focusing on a particular malady. While there is variation in the exact details, as a general guideline, these seven are aligned with the traditional Seven Deadly Sins, giving rise to the nomenclature. These seven are gluttony, lust, greed, wrath, envy, sloth, and pride. Each subspecies can only feed on that particular negative emotion and will hover in the astral near prominent sources of food. They will needle and prod at their food sources with their whispering, stoking these negative emotions in order to keep the feast flowing as long as possible without regard to the well-being of the victim. A slothful person will be told that nothing outside is more interesting than

what they now have, that things can be put off later, that no one expects them to really make a meeting, that they should just stay where they are, and so on, gradually convincing their victim to follow this path for longer and longer periods of time, providing the Sin-Eater with more and more nourishment. In each case, no actual mind control has been in evidence; it's simply compelling arguments that victims usually think that they themselves have put forth; only those able to perceive astrally know otherwise.

(Addendum: The first reports of Sin-Eaters follow the opening of the DC Rift and the approach of Halley's Comet. We have yet to determine which event, if either, is responsible for their arrival. While we have yet to see a Sin-Eater reproduce in captivity, there are an ever-growing number in the wild, indicating that they are either breeding or are arriving from Elsewhere. Any progress in this area should be immediately sent to the Council.)

THE LOTUS PEOPLE

Official Name: Otherfolk 02
Category: Mutated people
Protocol: We have been pursuing these people for decades and have had numerous close encounters but no contact has yet been made. If able, begin negotiations or, failing this, gathering remains for examination. Treat as infectious material.

Description: In general, the Lotus People are ordinary-seeming metahumans, but in every case yet seen they are human, rather than a metatype. It's possible that they are an expression of a new subspecies. It's also possible that they're disease-infected. All we know at this stage is that the Lotus People are named for their skin, which will have areas coated in a honeycombed structure that resembles lotus pods. These patches are often hidden away under clothing, allowing them to pass through ordinary society, but we have eyewitness reports of some with extensive covering of their face or hands, leaving such subtlety out of reach. (Test anyone assigned to this case for Trypophobia first, in order to avoid troublesome difficulties.) Who are they? What do they want? Is the condition due to infection? Magical radiation? How can we harness this?

THE SUFFERING

Official Name: Otherfolk 01
Category: Corporeal other
Protocol: Treat as feral animals. Contain in a secure area for observation or release in labyrinthine areas. They require meat and water on a regular basis. Lifespans are often brief, but some have been seen to thrive. A large enough cluster of mixed genders can occasionally breed.

Description: If a robot had never seen a human but had heard of them, and that robot was provided a room full of parts to assemble, they would create things like the Suffering. A torso (sometimes two co-joined) is standard, with one to eight limbs that are rarely matched properly, usually one head but sometimes more or less, zero to four eyes per head, zero to four mouths per body but often in unusual locations, backed with the speed and strength of an adrenaline-wracked human, the Suffering usually shuffle around as best they can, clearly in pain, with those possessing mouths mumbling to themselves, weeping, or hissing through yellow teeth. Occasionally they'll howl in agony, but when they detect metahumans, they turn all of their anger and pain upon them, hurling themselves at astonishing speed and savagery while making all-too-human screams. When slain, the Suffering quickly rot away into a black ichor, suggesting that they are somehow created of it.

Notes: We have yet to be able to recreate the effect ourselves. The most promising research was lost when lead researcher Alan Wainwright slipped away with his notes, burning down our facility in the process. Rumors of the Suffering have since spread across UCAS, suggesting that he has engineered a process in some way. Wainwright is declared a priority target and should be recovered alive if at all possible. We believe that he's heading to St. Louis at this time.

PROJECT MEL'THELEM: OBSERVATION ONGOING

ADEPT ÎNTUNERIC REPORTING

Item AZ57 is to be stored in an underground facility, with no other arcane items within a 1.5-kilometer radius. It is forbidden for any Awakened individual or creature to enter this radius as well. Excepting those authorized for Eloh-Araphel Gamma clearance, viewing of the item is limited

to the ballistic glass observation area encircling it. Lastly, this item is to be kept at site TV92, a well-known ley intersection, until and unless a more stable and powerful site can be arranged. Overlapping masking metamagics are to be applied at judicious distances.

Item AZ57 appears as a smooth, diamond-cut monolith of black rock, ten meters on each side, with manifold veins of orichalcum running through it. When the item was originally acquired, the dark rock was dull and the veins of orichalcum were not present. In 2061, corresponding with the proximity of Comet 1P/Halley, the dark rock turned from dull to glossy and orichalcum manifested in veins. In the years since, the orichalcum has continued to grow in brilliance and ambient power.

Item AZ57 may have some relation to the hitherto undiscovered artifacts known as mel'thelem, as noted in Item 54. Attempts to date the artifact have proven inconclusive.

- I guess we should be thankful for small miracles. If Ordo doesn't know how to use it, there is still time. But the fact that they have this, and it is working again, is very bad mojo. I'll have to get a team together.
- Frosty

- What do you know that we don't? Aside from the obvious dangers of Ordo having a battery for storing magic, why is this so upsetting?
- Axis Mundi

- Remember the post from Elijah in the *Forbidden Arcana* upload? The things he saw? He isn't the only one who has witnessed what's on the other side. The bridge he talked about? This thing can build (or rebuild) it ... fast.
- Frosty

- USER: FROSTY HAS LOGGED OFF

- Taken alongside the reports of LILITU above, this is quite alarming. Dit dis caxarrick vo jed. Pum caxan boor dit. Dit whults vupp whoaxad, pi Pum caxaniz taxark axafuk dit. Dit weniz rot vo. Kew Daxammit! Kot uk eb vupp whoaxad! I'm sorry. I have go lie down.
- Elijah

- USER: ELIJAH HAS LOGGED OFF

- For once, I would love a nice, quiet JackPoint evening where the world doesn't seem to be ending every Thursday. Someone going to check on Elijah?
- Slamm-0!

Initial tests on Item AZ57 showed it completely inert with the exception of metaplanar mana residue, similar to that found on Item AZ79, Item CL56, and SE55. After the comet event in 2061, however, the artifact appears to be a receptacle for ambient and directed mana. Even without direct intervention, the item draws mana from ley lines and untethered magics. When acted directly upon using magic, results are varied. Most applications of direct mana increased the level of measurable magic, with the item acting as a battery. However, when using formulas [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], [redacted], or [redacted], the result was not storage of mana, but instead an abundant release of mana stored within the item. The results of these experiments caused the death of one Grand Magus and 132 arcane scientists. We do not yet possess the knowledge to release the mana within the item safely, although it is clear this is its intended purpose.

Magus [redacted] reported small and relatively safe success using formula [redacted], which carries with it its own dangers due to the [redacted] needed to perform it.

PROJECT BERMONDSEY: ONGOING

RESEARCHER ROSU MARE REPORTING

RB76, also known as the Bermondsey Statue, also known as the Idol of Chemosh, was acquired by trade. [Redacted] of the Halloweeners gang in Redmond, Seattle, UCAS, parted with it in exchange for item 6WT-PB.

RB76 is a small statue, 0.5 meters in height, made of an unknown pale-green stone. It depicts a classical image of the Elder God Chemosh, a deity alternatively worshipped and feared in the Levant. It features humanoid chest and arms, piscine lower body, and a taurine head. This description is not absolute, though, as multiple viewings of the object produce various alternative descriptions, which may vary based upon the observer, the number of occasions observed, and proximity to the item itself. If touched (which is not permitted without consent of a Grand Magus), the item is oleaginous.

After investigation, the item is thought to have created a stable alchera in the area of Redmond known as Glow City. The alchera persisted for five months in 2076, recreating England, circa 1849. It is reported that this alchera is no longer stable, but multiple reports from Initiate Gunther state the al-

SUPPLEMENTAL NOTE

The Mannings were executed, and through unknown means the idol became the possession of Captain Luke McRedmond, who tarried in London a time before completing his emigration from Ireland to the United States.

In 1870, Captain McRedmond and colleague Warren Perrigo settled in Washington state. Perrigo founded an inn known as Melrose House, while McRedmond built a village called Salmonburg. Due to the popularity of the inn, the name of the village was changed to Melrose. Jealousy erupted between the two and McRedmond, once he became postmaster of the village, changed the name of the village to Redmond, infuriating Perrigo. This bad blood continued for years, and Perrigo, looking for revenge, stole the idol from McRedmond, placing it in Melrose House. Years later, Melrose House was boarded up, and a disgruntled employee took the statue as remuneration, passing it on to future generations.

In 2013, the Trojan-Satop Shiawase nuclear plant melted down, killing the family of the Melrose employee and turning Redmond into wasteland. The statue was buried underneath what would become the so-called Redmond Barrens.

- Could an ancient evil artifact explain why Redmond is such a drekhole?
- Snopes

- Maybe. But more likely it's because of greed and metahuman nature.
- Chainmaker

In 2057, due to incidents related to AZ57, a spike in ambient mana seems to have caused the first alchera to materialize related to RB76. Mental illness in and around Glow City is widespread as wild animals and naked humans were found dead together, reported to have been braying and rutting together. Pursuant to later events in 2057, the mana spike diminished and the alchera did not appear again until 2076, accompanied by similar occurrences of bizarre behavior.

- Anyone remember Jack the Ripper?
- Chainmaker

- The guy amped up on a dreamchip stolen from Global Technologies in the early '50s?
- The Smiling Bandit

- I know two that showed up in 2054. The Emerald City Ripper in Seattle, who the press called the "New Jack the Ripper," or the clone created in London on behalf of Hildebrandt-Kleinfort-Bernal to discredit Transys Neuronet. One of those?
- Bull

- Armin Vogler? The copycat Jack the Ripper from Stuttgart in 2058? Or maybe Synapse? Didn't GOD describe them as the electronic "Jack the Ripper?"
- Turbo Bunny

- There's a Jack the Ripper Society in London. There's also a number of runners with similar names: Jack the Chipper, Jack the Rapper, Jack the Robber, or Jack the Stripper.
- Kane

- I didn't realize there were so many Jack the Rippers. But no, I was talking about a dude named Herbert Bunn. He was a decker from Redmond from way back. He hung out with all the Halloweener kids, who dug the way he looked. His pad was always spooky, too. Anyway, word is, he vanished in '57 after investigating that "ghost London" in Glow City. A few years ago, he showed back up at his old place with no memory of the last twenty years. If this statue can do that, maybe it's better off with Ordo.
- Chainmaker

- Glad to hear Jack is back! He was a slick chummer. But I have to disagree. Ordo has been messing around where they shouldn't for too long. This entire upload has convinced me they are heading us all down a path that we might not be able to return from.
- Old Crow

chera in Glow City has reappeared and has been observable at least once since our acquisition. We have observed no alchera activity connected with the item since our observation began.

Archived data suggests this item was responsible for the so-called Bermondsey Horror, large-scale unreported murders, and the outbreak of cholera in London at that time. See archive BH-01. This suggests that Marie and Frederick George Manning were involved in Elder God veneration, as they were in possession of the item at that time.

Extreme caution is suggested when observing or even approaching closer than ten meters to the item. Uncontrollable urges, even among those of us who are typically unaffected, has been consistently observed. Behavior linked to murderous impulses, sacrifices, loss of higher-brain function, obsessive actions, lack of impulse control, as well as loss of fine motor control have all been observed in repeatable experiments.

- This next section is a bit of an oddball, but since when has that stopped us? A detective named Danny Penkski found himself tracking down some of these Elder God cultists, and we have some transcripts from his investigation. Read on and learn what you can.
- Glitch

DETECTIVE DANNY PENKSKI—NOTE DICTATION ACTIVE

DATE: OCTOBER 8
LOCATION: PRECINCT 8, GARAGE

Detective Dan: So tag this to case number. What is it ... [C2483611] Another missing person, Carol Ambrose. Viki, please scan SIN.

Viki: SIN scanned.

Detective Dan: Viki, please relay my notes so far.

Viki: Carol Ambrose, age twenty-six, female. Worked at the Black Cat Club as a barista. Black Cat Club is a high-end place with some magical entertainment. No one at the club so far stands out as a suspect. Investigation of Ms. Carol's apartment shows no evidence of struggle. No commlink or vehicle found. Door still locked, so assumed that her disappearance started somewhere else. Noted Evidence #1: red waxy material dripped on carpet. Odd, once-spherical candle in trash. Analysis of wax shows traces of blood and bee pollen. Material can be from some paranormal bee. Noted evidence #2: Matrix searches on SIN found occult queries on magic spells for success and money. Not sure if any of the sites are suspect.

Detective Dan: Viki, please chain evidence to SIN and search related cases

Viki: Saving evidence. Searching for related cases.

Unidentified speaker: Heh, you are so polite to your comm.

Viki: <Voice recognition activated> Identifying voice as Sir Simon Griffon.

Griff: So, Danny, another cold case?

Detective Dan: Maybe. This cult of the Elder God seems to be popping up around town. Have you heard of them?

Griff: No. Nothing more than any other crazy cult. I can put the word out and see what comes up.

SIR SIMON GRIFFON, A.K.A. GRIFF

- Member of the New Knights Templar. Active associate with Lone Star.
- Born: Geneva, Switzerland
- Weapon permits allowable

Detective Dan: Right now, there might not be any correlation. Like it's just some Matrix cult for occultists, and she just was checking it out.

Griff: You might be right. This unified magic theory tries to make everything formulaic, which means any Awakened can start his own cult.

Detective Dan: So given such an open list, who could be in this cult of the elder gods? Could it be followers of Gaf or Tak? Just with a different MO? I mean they've caused trouble before?

Viki: <Searching Gaf associated with Tak> Gaf, Tak, Dru, Obe are great shadow spirits. Powerful enough to have manifested their own moons in the metaplane of shadow.

Griff: Not likely. The brothers of shadow always require some personal sacrifice to them in order for the member to receive power. Have you seen any unusual power struggles or vacuums in the criminal underworld?

Detective Dan: Not really. They may not be dealing with criminals this time. Most of the missing persons are financially stable—mainly wageslaves. This last girl was a barista at a high-class club. I don't see any notes on occult affiliation, but she didn't have that many close friends.

Griff: The Brothers also don't stay in the shadows for very long. Their egos won't let them be humble. They need to gloat, bragging about their exploits to each other.

Detective Dan: So other than the shadow spirits, who else would be suspect? I don't see any of those damn free spirits out at the crater doing anything. What about a new version of Universal Brotherhood?

Viki: <Searching Universal Brotherhood?> Universal Brotherhood was an organization of charity across the globe. It was controlled by insect spirits infiltrating the physical world.

Griff: That would be interesting, similar MO, but would they believe people would fall for it

RUN HOOKS

THE BOOK OF GAF

The Aleph Society surfaces in Peabody, Massachusetts, as a religious sanctuary against CFD, shunning the technological Armageddon. Father Joseph was already leery of people who augment themselves, so it didn't take much from Gaf to entice him. The congregation grows as people fear their electronics can contaminate them. Those who repent are offered redemption with power from Gaf. As the congregation grows, Gaf starts to sow dissonance into the town, making them believe that some people have been taken over by the nanites. Gaf influences Father Joseph to use "Exorcism" to purge these people. A witch trial occurs, and Gaf starts to receive his sacrifices.

THE BOOK OF TAK

In Tiajuana's Estuary, the efforts of Tak come to fruition as the marshy estuary becomes a media sensation with a bloodsport/manhunt throughout it. Tak empowers various gladiators with mystic might and blood rage for the entire world to see. Through Director Nunez of Aztech's leading media outlet, Tak has a better understanding of the Sixth World and seeks to spread his influence through the gladiator fandom. Not able to make copies of the summoning ritual himself or coerce others to do so, he devises a set of puzzles on the Aztlan Matrix to give parts of the ritual. If the Fan is fanatic enough to find all the pieces, they can summon Tak and get their own taste of gladiator power of their choosing. Thus Tak can beat his brothers in influence.

THE BOOK OF DRU

Thrash metal has a new player as Dru has found a kindred spirit in the band Malevolent Sins and their prolific use of body mods. Angry music and Dru's silvery tongue convinces many groupies to follow them and torture themselves with painful piercing and the mark of Dru. While the tattooed symbol of Dru shows his influence, those who follow with a true branding of the symbol can be possessed/controlled by Dru. Dru mocks his brother through lyrics and even has the current album art showing a picture a pale moon, his home. The band is currently touring Europe with future global plans provided he can keep the band alive and not fighting. Dru has overextended his power by requiring all four members to work together.

THE BOOK OF OBE

The fast-food market sometimes can be too fast. Obe has been losing his grip on a cadre of ghouls as his refined culinary business of metahuman flesh and whispered recipes has been drawing in increasingly feral customers. Karma gives him a second chance as a few of his "sushi" meals were ordered by starving students in Denver. Word of Wild Moon Meals has been passed around to other students. While his five-nuyen "Black Jungle" noodles have been quite popular, he hasn't fully drawn in the students with offers of power. His latest scheme is fortune cookies with enchanted messages, with the goal of getting students to commit to a "contract" of grades, popularity, and gruesome punishments directed at rivals. He hates that his brothers have more success than him.

again? But here's where I see the problem: people became hosts and didn't just disappear. Still, it's a good theory.

Detective Dan: If I recall correctly, people did disappear, they just "reappeared" at a different brotherhood. She could be Everett right now, but with the current cold-case budget, I don't have a facial recog agent to check those feeds.

DETECTIVE DANNY PENKSKI—NOTE DICTATION END

VIKI: RECEIVING CASE UPDATE FROM LONE STAR. FILE UPLOADED

From Astral forensics: Hi, Dan, we found that Fourth and Wellsboro may have been the last place she was located. Check out 104th Street and First. Some serious magic went down there, probably ritual magic. We found some red wax on the street and the remains of her car in the alley. Your guess would be as good as mine as to what happened to it. We've only found maybe thirty percent of the original.

Astral space is hot. Sorry to say that we don't have any astral signatures, as someone attempted

to smudge the evidence. Careful out there, Dan. Whomever pulled off this magic did some drek that the team hasn't seen before.

DETECTIVE DANNY PENKSKI—NOTE DICTATION ACTIVATED

DATE: OCTOBER 8
LOCATION: FOURTH STREET AND WELLSBORO

Detective Dan: Here, hand over that soykaf and check the astral forensics. Well, that rules out most of the usual suspects, correct?

Griff: What about larger spiritual forces, like the Dweller on the Threshold?

Detective Dan: That would be above my pay-grade. How would such forces get here on earth? What did you do, order that vanilla crap? You know you're going to go blind drinking that drek.

Griff: Considering that these beings are supposed to be able to create metaplanes, not sure what could stop them. And if you have a problem, then switch. Mine's the French, yours is that prissy all-natural stuff. And you owe me another twenty nuyen.

Detective Dan: How many are there?

Griff: Besides the Dweller on the Threshold? Not sure. My order only discusses two, the Dweller on the Threshold and the Hungry Void. The Dweller is fairly known entity, but the Hungry Void—well, think of it as a black hole with attitude.

Detective Dan: I hate to ask, but why do the Knights Templar concern themselves with this Hungry Void?

Griff: <Cough> The Hungry Void can spit out twisted husks that once were spirits. These mad creatures will destroy things in the name

ADVENTURE HOOKS

DWELLER TAKES A HOLIDAY

Everyone needs a vacation sometimes, including the Dweller on the Threshold. It assumes metahuman form so it can visit the physical world. The place it chooses: Havana. It is there that it tries hand-rolled cigars and aged rum. While it is away however, no one can cross the threshold to other metaplanes without an astral gate. Spirits cannot be summoned, and those that were summoned find themselves stuck after their services are complete.

If it stays too long, the Dweller may forget who it is; the entertainment of Cuba might be too tempting. The local spirits are worried that the Dweller may become too human and seek people to convince it to go back to its day job.

HUNGER IN THE SHELL

In the parched deserts around Phoenix, an unusual haboob locks down the city. Thick dust and red sky hides five manifested husks from the Hungry Void. They can suck the life essence out of their victims and force the dried bag of bones into a labor force. Think of them as shedim's ugly cousins. The Yellowstone Catalysm has caused ripples in the astral, allowing the husks to force their way through. They have sensed a larger rift at the Lucky Strike Bowling Alley and are making their way toward the site. Their plan is to ritually force the rift open, wide enough to allow the Void to feed. A local Knight Templar needs help locating and closing the rift before the husks accomplish their goal.

IN REGARD TO VIOLET

Astral projecting can be hazardous, and it's even more so when the Violet Gas takes you for a ride. One second you were scouting a place astrally, and the next you find yourself sitting on some flowery field in a metaplane. You are not alone as a violet fog rolls in on your team. Apparently, the entity known as the Violet Gas has taken an interest in your group's actions. Through a series of mental images, it requests the team to steal a book from the Library of Eng. You're not sure why a sentient fogbank wants a book or what it's going to do with it, but the impression of a reward of gemstones pushes that thought aside.

The Library isn't going to let anyone take a book from it. Besides the usual malevolent spirits in the Id, the Library can animate itself, so the challenge is like going into a lion's mouth to pull a tooth. If the book is presented to the Violet Fog, the back pages are written in some odd language, like a pen pal's response. The Violet Gas then drops off the book in what appears to be a mailbox that wasn't there before.

of the Void. The more intelligent ones draw sacrificial rituals to feed the insatiable hunger of the Void. The Templars look for any sign of the Void and destroy it before ...

Detective Dan: Before?

Griff: Let's just say I don't want a black hole in our solar system. Same disastrous results.

<SEARCHING "DWELLER" ASSOCIATED WITH "THRESHOLD">

As per the Aetherpedia, the Dweller on the Threshold is a powerful entity that the Awakened meet as they travel to other astral planes without a spirit or gateway. The Awakened also can interact with the Dweller in facing ordeals to learn more powerful techniques (see also *Initiate*).

DETECTIVE DANNY PENKSKI—NOTE DICTATION END

DETECTIVE DANNY PENKSKI—NOTE DICTATION ACTIVATED

DATE: OCTOBER 8
LOCATION: 104TH STREET AND FIRST, DOWNTOWN

Detective Dan: Two golden menus, and make it apple pie for desert. Does that work for you, Griff?

Griff: Absolutely, especially when you're buying.

Detective Dan: The security footage still isn't yielding any new results. She was last seen leaving the club and getting into her car. We still don't know where her car is, and nothing from her commlink to the autopilot are responding to location pings. I checked into the club's background. The parent company is Aztechnology, with a few dozen children in between. Not that all Aztechnology buildings have underground temples to sacrifice vic-

tims, but is it conceivable? That a corporation can be sponsoring an Elder God cult?

Griff: And they say you aren't biased. There already is a founding religion of Aztlan, and the Feathered Serpent wouldn't be pleased to hear about some elder god muscling in on his people.

Detective Dan: I didn't think of that. I was thinking more about how the various corporate laws can be really bizarre. I heard that Horizon employees can legally marry a drone.

Griff: Ugh! Don't make me laugh while I'm drinking. You have to stop reading that MeFeed crap. I'll put it this way, though. Just remember that corps don't have to worry about our laws so much—they have their own.

DETECTIVE DANNY PENKSKI—NOTE DICTATION END

DETECTIVE DANNY PENKSKI—NOTE DICTATION ACTIVATED

DATE: OCTOBER 8
LOCATION: 136TH STREET
NEAR THE PUYALLUP BARRENS

Detective Dan: Okay, I'm here, get in and tell me what you got.

Griff: So I got some news from my contacts, but it's not good. An hour after getting this intel, the Crestent Temple burned to the ground. My contact went missing.

Viki: <Uploading document.>

Document: Why is this age noted as the Sixth World? Because there were five previous ages following the cycle of magic. As noted in the stone fragments found in the Savyon Cave in France, there are gods beyond age whom the ancient gods feared. Zeus overthrowing Kronos is the last remnants of the legend that propagated through the ages that the people remember relating to the fragments. The only other item we found mentioning elder gods is the Crumpled Orchalcium Pages, which contains the frantic writings of Pentaclese. The writings read: "Angels and demons fought side by side to close the blood eclipse from which the elder gods bring their gaze upon the world." If Pentaclese is to be believed, then the elder gods are a conceivable threat to all metaplanes. Hope this helps. Sincerely, Sir Nadol.

Detective Dan: Seriously, are you sure the caveman's stories are related to the modern-day cultists?

Griff: I wouldn't think so either, but Nodol is now missing, and the church is gone. Take it as it is—this is more than a Matrix cult for occultists.

Detective Dan: Dang, Griff! Way to throw a wet blanket on the mood. I still have forty years till retirement, and you give me this revelation. I'd rather go back to being a beat cop and investigate thefts and shootings. Things I understand.

Griff: Oh, please. You're a chrome knight, ready to take on criminal giants no matter the odds. Damsels in distress are your weakness, and the missing barista is no exception. It's why the Templar order likes you so much. It's not because of your looks.

Detective Dan: Now you're going to make me blush. So where do we go from here?

Griff: You're the detective. I'm just the dashing sidekick.

Detective Dan: Viki, please note all the current missing person's cases on the map with percentage relating to this Cult of the Elder Gods starting at eighty percent. Start throwing up maps with where they work, where they live, where they were last seen. Serial killers have hunting grounds. I'm going to guess that the cults have some location required for their work, something that may not be portable.

Griff: Now we're doing Rorschach tests? Oh wait, hold on. Go back one. That's a sigil.

Detective Dan: How can you tell? That other one looks like a rabbit.

Griff: It's part of ritual summoning. The one I know looks like this.

Detective Dan: Decrease probability to seventy-five percent. All right, now down to seventy percent.

Griff: See! It matches! And the power point is right here, what's this location?

Viki: Hop Sok Tower. A six-story mall relating to Asian music and memorabilia. Went bankrupt years ago, with the contract loss of Teiko Ikemoto.

Detective Dan: Well it's a good a place as any to check out. Viki, tag this map to all related cold case files.

Viki: Tag complete.

Griff: Okay Chromed Knight, lets go see if there's any damsels to save!

DETECTIVE DANNY PENKSKI– NOTE DICTATION END

DETECTIVE DANNY PENKSKI– NOTE DICTATION

VIKI: <SOFTWARE UPDATE>
<NEW USER ADDED. CAMERA TRACKING AND MOTION RECORDING ACTIVATED.>
<FILE UPLOADED … EVENT RECORD GENERATED, SUPPLEMENTED BY MAGISTER>

DATE: OCTOBER 8
LOCATION: HOP SOK TOWER, ABANDONED K-POP SHOP

Danny and Griff encounter a mostly vacant fifth floor. The only furnishing is an end table with a large book open. Writing in this book is a tall, clean-shaven man with spiked hair. He appears oblivious to the detectives' entrance.

Without stopping writing, the man speaks. "The cult you might be looking for has departed. They left an intricate ritual behind."

Danny pulls his gun and steps toward the man.

"I wouldn't get any closer. He doesn't like authorities," the man says. This time pausing his writing.

"Who else is here with you?" asks Danny as he moves closer.

"Back off, law and order!" barks a second voice. Partially manifesting from the aether was some creature. Bits of skin and bones marked with writing hang in the air, showing the approximate size of the creature, leaving his imagination to dwell on the gaps.

Griff pulls his weapon.

"Please, gentlemen," the first individual says. "I'm almost done. You shortly can have the place to yourselves. Mind the ritual; these people didn't translate it well."

"You need to come with us. We have question on this cult of the Elder Gods."

"All I know is that they are gone. And their translation skills are suspect." As he writes, there's a smoldering flair within the spirit. A bone appears, engraved with strange runes.

"What about Jennifer Els, the latest missing person?" asks Danny as he flashes a hologram of the woman.

"She was alive when the ritual started. The wax you see, though, is red for a reason. She may still be alive, but it is unlikely that she is entirely intact.

"Okay, mister, you are the closest thing we have to the cult, and you're a witness to these missing people. For all I know, you're a cultist yourself."

The man sighs, "Be cautious of judging those of whom you have no knowledge. If you insist on restraining me, all I can say is that it will not work out to your benefit." The man closes the book. The spirit fades away.

Griff steps forward, crossing the threshold of the ritual circle. The world changes. Fog falls on buildings, tendrils writhing, seeming to reach. The circle becomes a fleshy maw sinking in the dark depths. Fear appears on Griff's face as he falls in. A second flash and peal of thunder, then all is as it was. Griff is gone. The circle is ruined.

The man starts to leave. Danny fires his gun. Three rounds aimed at a man, hitting the spirit form instead. With each impact the book bleeds, leaving a dark trail to the door. Detective Dan has only a moment of shock as the spirit backhands him, sending his unconscious body smashing through the door.

DETECTIVE DANNY PENKSKI– NOTE DICTATION

DATE: OCTOBER 8
LOCATION: HOP SOK TOWER
<VOICE ID LABELED "MAGISTER" ADDED TO DATABASE.>

Magister: And here we are. Griff's body was found in the lobby of the building. He was dead. Looked like he fell from fifteen meters or so. Though there was no hole in the ceiling or opening where he could have come through. Someone's going to have fun cleaning up that report. Just a moment ago, a new file was sent to Dan. It had a report on the blood sample of his suspect. It had hundreds of DNA hits, many linked to missing persons. Things are not going to become any simpler.

UNKNOWN: Shall I kill him?

Viki: <Voice Recognition activated> No known voice. Add new person?

Magister: Oh look, Viki wants to get to know you. No, Viki, it's not time yet. And no, you're not

going to kill him. Do you not remember the cleaning lady incident?

UNKNOWN: As you wish.

Magister: At least the detective was organized. Lazy deductive skills, though, but what do you expect from a mundane trying to understand magic? Assuming you will listen to this soon, Detective Dan, let this be a warning: Stay out of my work. Viki, do be so kind as to send a copy to this address before giving your location to the police.

Viki: Sending copy. Sending location. Dictation end.

DWELLERS OF THE DEEP FOUNDATIONS

- We've talked before about the Foundation of the Matrix, although we don't understand what it is we're talking about. Even those of us who have experienced it firsthand struggle to describe what it is and know next to nothing of how it grows or came to be the way it is. Coming here on JackPoint and trying to share the information is like Plato's allegory. In that story, prisoners are in a cave, arms and legs bound, and their head is fixed so that they cannot see anything but the wall in front of them. They'd been there since birth and have never seen outside of the cave. Behind them is a raised walkway, and behind that is a fire. People outside use this walkway and carry things on their head like animals, plants, wood and stone. The prisoners only see the shadows and assume that the entirety of life is seen in these shadows. And then one prisoner escapes to the outside. She experiences terrible and beautiful life in all of its glory, infinitely more complex and alive than anything she saw in the cave. She then returns to the cave to tell her fellow prisoners what reality is like. But they don't believe her. They can't. Their brains are just not wired for it and they get frustrated by all of her talk. The Foundation is like that, and JackPoint is the cave. But let me twist the allegory a bit. What if the space outside the cave (the Foundation in our example) contained more mystery and horror than revelation? What if instead of being glad we were freed, we just wish we'd never left the cave? That is how I'm beginning to feel about the Foundation. There is too much dark and twisted and mysterious there to let me sleep well at night. I wish I'd never gone. I wish I could forget I was ever there, and I know Glitch and Netcat feel the same way after our last jaunt. I wish I never left the cave. What follows is just a few reasons why.
- Bull

- Why, Bull, you continue to surprise. I never took you for a fan of the classics.
- Red

- What you don't know about me could fill a library, kid.
- Bull

THEY ARE KILLING US LIKE ANIMALS!

POSTED BY: PUCK

- The Foundations of the Matrix are a mystery to us and are likely to remain so for quite some time. Some parts of the mystery need to be solved, though, because there is always a chance that what we don't know will bite us in the ass. This seems particularly true with a new group that has been seen in the deepest part of the Matrix, a group that ... well, I don't want to steal any of Puck's thunder. So let's see what he has to tell us.
- Glitch

You don't have to trust me. I understand why you wouldn't. We don't have to rehash all of that. But you should understand that there are things I know, and things I understand.

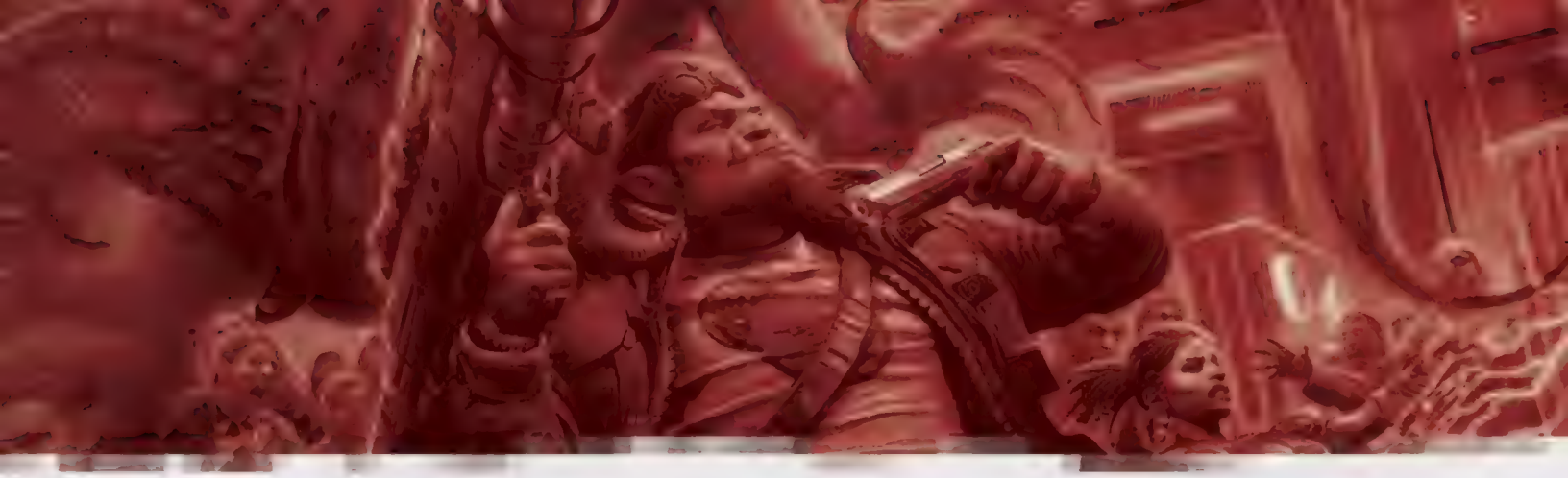
I know how charismatic leaders inspire devotion. I know how people get so caught up in big causes that they don't think about the specific actions they're undertaking. I know how ideals get twisted. Anyone want to argue that I don't?

And most of all, I know how to read the signs of concerted activity in advance, in those stages where the group effort is not meant to be detected. I know what fanaticism looks like. And I've seen it. Recently.

But as I mentioned, you may not trust me. So, don't. Trust these people.

LUDO ERLBETTER

I was working on new hosts for SpinStorm, hosts we had to expand rapidly to keep up with the pace of the corp's expansion. Most of it went fine, because that's why people hire me—to make things work. But we had some rooms—"lower" rooms, inasmuch as dimensions have meaning in the Matrix, but the kind of areas that hold support functions, not public areas—start being in-



fested by these vines. Thick, leafy vines that grew back as fast as you cut them. And they weren't just visual clutter; they affected not only the rooms where they grew, but the entire host. Performance slowed down, icons and backgrounds flickered or were temporarily de-rezzed—all sorts of annoying shit.

Now, I'm no chump. Every bit of geography in every part of a host can be recorded easily, so it's like having security cameras on every virtual millimeter of the place. And you don't even have to spend a lot of person-hours watching all the "footage"; just make a program that will alert you when there are changes of a certain nature, and have it do most of looking for you. So I wrote the program fast, and got almost no hits. Because do you know what happened in the room where the vines grew? Nothing, except vines growing. Yeah, they grew quickly, but that was it.

But there was one hit. One place where someone walked in where they were not supposed to. It was a room I call the generator, because it pulls energy from the Foundation to form and power the host. Which is not what a generator does. It's more of a converter. Or transformer. Whatever. Not important.

That room had two intruders. Icons that were not authorized and that I had never seen before. Their heads were wedge-like, narrowing to pointed chins above triangular mouths, mouths that seemed incapable of closing and were lined with thin, shark-like teeth that were spread far enough apart to show plenty of gums. The corners of their eyes squinted in anger and hate. Their torsos were vague, blurred, indistinguishable, faded behind the constant reach of sharp-clawed, yellowed hands that were always extended, always moving toward something just beyond their grasp. They walked into a room that had just been cleaned of vines, and the found thin tendrils hidden in a corner, and they twisted and pulled until the vines once again dominated the room. Then they snapped out of existence.

I have no idea who they were, and the only time I have seen their faces since is when I close my eyes and try to sleep.

SHIRI GUPTA

Of *course* someone went and ruined Matrix clubbing. It's so good to be somewhere where people can't grab you, can't roofie you, and all that, so of *course* some idiots had to go and make Matrix clubs horrible. I'd been hanging out a lot at the virtual component of Penumbra Station—I know, I know, don't look at me like that, but since the remodel, the place is *wiz*–and most of the time I'm with friends, dancing my head off, because who has to dance with one person, right? I mean, what is this, the twentieth century? Anyway, the one night these guys—or things, whatever, because I don't know if they really were guys or what they were—came in, and they had some weird thing about their icons and their hands, because they were mostly like blurs but their hands were clear and their hands always seemed to be *coming right at you*, which, I mean, ick, right? So they come in, all graspy, and one of them says, like, "Can I cut in?", and I have no idea what that's supposed to be about, but they don't wait for an answer, they shove their way in, and then their hands—I don't know how many of them there are, five? Ten?—their hands are all over, across the whole floor, pushing everyone, everything. People are falling, one man is up against the wall screaming, then the lights started flashing, even more than they do while the music is going, white then red then blue then green in hyper time, and I can't really see anything but the lights and hands, hands everywhere, and every time one brushes me it was total ice, just a freeze going right through me, so I started shying away from them but it seemed like

the hands were everywhere, and the lights were flashing faster and faster, and finally I passed out or got kicked out or whatever, and I woke up in my surfing chair with a huge headache and I slept for like ten hours. I haven't been back since, because why would I want to? I haven't even been in full VR. The whole thing was just the worst.

COLT COULSEN

Let me say this first: Nothing is going to scare me out of the Foundations. You understand? I don't care what I see down there, or what I run into. Deep runs are where I make my best living, and I'm not gonna cut off my income just because drek gets weird.

That said? This got more bizarre than even I'm used to.

This was a journey down into some Global Sandstorm Foundations, because plenty of people are paying for information about that corp. If I find something good, I can get three, four high-paying clients bidding for it. It helps that I've been down to this Foundation before, so I know the territory. Know, but don't like. It's a terrible place, like a skyraker factory. Each floor is a good two thousand square meters, but long and thin, with old-fashioned conveyer belts made of steel links, the kind that clatter with every centimeter they travel. And this is a Foundation, so the clatter isn't just noise. It's a sensation that sinks into the bottom of your spine and stays there all the time until you feel like you can't walk. And it feels like it's grinding your teeth to powder. Plus, there is oil and smoke everywhere, and strange shuffling figures in sooty aprons who look like they have been carrying thing back and forth since the beginning of time. The figures don't matter—they're constructs. It's the stuff they're moving and building that's important. A lot of it is just basic structural code, but you can find some nuggets pointing to Sandstorm's plans for the hosts they're constructing, and if you know how to read the tea leaves, if can be some valuable info. So, not my favorite place to go, but usually worth it.

The way we go in, we start from the top of this building and go down. At this one point, we were about fifty stories down. That's a long way, because it's not like there are elevators. There is one stairway connecting each floor to the other, but they're not connected. You hit one floor, then you have to wander to find the next flight down. Only Matrix speeds make this bearable.

Anyway, fifty stories down, it's like the whole place turns into a chicken-processing plant or something. Feathers everywhere, and the smell of dried blood, and constant chopping, chopping, chopping. One room, one long room, is nothing but guillotine-like blades rising and falling, on and on, metal hitting metal after passing through flesh and bone. The chickens are on all parts of the belt, but I can't really tell where they come from—they seem to just flow to the belt from all parts of the room. The blades keep making their regular motion while we crossed the floor, but at about the middle of the building, the sound changed. The sharp click of metal on metal faded, replaced by a broader, softer sound. I looked at the blades. They were gone. Instead, they were hands, palm down, smacking the belt below. The chickens were not being beheaded. They were being crushed. The mess of this floor is bad on any day. Now it was worse.

Then the hands started missing the belts. They hit the floor, some even went out so wide that they hit the walls. I didn't realize one was coming at me until it was about to hit me in the face. I ducked, only to see another hand sweeping at me. I rolled left.

When I got to my feet, I saw the arms descending. They were attached to misty forms that started to coalesce into bodies, and then were heads above them. Heads with hungry, gaping, triangular mouths that seemed like they could never close properly. Dotted with thin, needle-like teeth. Their hands were always out, always forward. They had formed so fast, out of nothing, and come from every direction, that we were surrounded. I knew there was a chance we would have to blast our way out—there always is—but I like to take the measure of any foe before I start my attack. You know, the better to know what will hurt them the most.

We had about eight of the people, the things, closing on us. Then they stopped, when they were about three meters away. Drool from their mouths dripped out, hitting the cement floor with echoes like dripping water in a cavern pool.

We seemed to have hit an impasse, so I broke it by speaking.

"I'm not sure you're surprised to see us here," I said.

They responded with more slavering.

"You might have even been looking for us," I continued. If anything, their mouths grew wider. "So what do you want?" I asked.

They stood still for another moment. Then one of them jumped. It was a high jump, a good two-thirds of a meter, and when they landed, it was with an echoing thud. Then another jumped. And another. Soon, all of them were leaping up and down, and the floor was shaking beneath us as they landed. Then there was more than shaking. There was cracking, loud, splintering sounds. I saw the floor breaking.

"Move!" I yelled. I ran forward, and the team followed me. The creatures did not. They stayed there, jumping, jumping, jumping. The factory floors passed us in a blur as we sprinted forward. Forward and up. Dashing at top speed, and no matter how many floors we climbed, I could hear the cracking like they were right behind us. I wish I could have just logged off, but the dumpshock from a Foundation could make your brain dribble out your ears. We kept moving until we were at the top, and we dashed out as we hurt the sound of total collapse behind us.

I've tried to find the building since I left, but the connection is gone. Whatever the building had once been, it now was nothing.

- I've been to this building, both before and after the visit Coulsen describes. The top floors haven't been rebuilt, but the lower floors remain standing, at least. They're changed, though. What was once a weird but reasonably orderly factory is now ... randomized. Conveyer belts randomly run into walls, tables are mounted on the ceiling, hammers that should clang make noises like rubber ducks, and so on. The purpose for this is beyond me.
- Pistons

JAQUITH

If you're reading this, there may still be a chance for you. Me, I'm fragged once this gets out. That's a thing metahumans say, right? Fragged? Slotted? Geeked? It all means the same thing: They're gonna fucking kill me and no one will stop them. Let's be honest, who would even care about what happens to a synthetic?

You're probably wondering who I'm talking about even as the answer starts to form in the back of that code cluster you call your mind. You've almost certainly seen them already, Process knows they're everywhere. Watching us daily, cataloguing our every movement. You probably thought they were corporate wageslaves or maybe GOD agents keeping tabs on you, but deep down some

part of you has always known that they were something far worse. You've felt it, haven't you? The hatred in their gaze?

They will come for you eventually, just as they'll come for me.

Bear with me, because this is a tough topic to teach. The truth is this: I know almost nothing about them. They bear none of the standard Matrix identifiers, and their personas are just voids empty of information. It's like they don't even exist. (I know what you're thinking right now, but trust me they absolutely exist.) I've taken to calling them the Null Sect because I know they're somehow connected to the Null nodes in Foundations, though I'm not certain if that's an appropriate name for them. I suspect there is far more to them than what I have seen.

You should know that often they are not easily identified, even when looked upon directly. Though I said they do not seem to exist in the Matrix, that is only because I saw through the masks they wore. The icons I inspected were utterly convincing as ordinary Matrix objects and persona. The Null are experts at blending into the background of a given host or grid, somehow even more adept at it than we are. I suspect they are somehow a part of the Matrix itself, more so than we could ever hope to be. When they drop the disguise and come out, though, they make themselves known, with an appearance that observers cannot forget. They have gaping, triangular mouths, with sharp teeth, and they look ready to suck in and devour anything nearby. They are also known for their hands, clawed limbs reaching out from indistinct bodies, grasping for anything nearby.

They lurk inside hosts that they have corrupted in their own way. These places seem ordinary upon first glance, but a deeper look will reveal just how *wrong* things really are. Their hosts are not passive locations with reactive security, rather they are conscious, reactive beings. These hosts run their own type of Patrol IC, but this is just for keeping up appearances; each icon within a Null host is watching your every movement. They want you to find the objective of your mission, they revel is seeing you fall just as you reach the cusp of success. It makes the moment even more satisfying when they drop the hammer on you. Sometimes they work subtly, but increasingly, they seem intent on destruction, and making their presence clear to the people they confront. This is a bad trend, and I don't know where it will stop.

So there it is. There's something in the Foundation, even under the newest state-of-the-art hosts like SpinStorm's. They are organized, and they have an agenda. They are dominant in their element, which seems to be everywhere in the Matrix. They avoid most every Matrix user, but the reports we have of the sect indicate an incredibly high percentage of AI and technomancers encounter them when they get anywhere near a Foundation, and often when they aren't anywhere close to one. Paradoxically, they seem to have a sort of hive mind, but also respond to certain leaders, although they are not easy to detect.

When I encountered them myself, it was only after months of feeling watched. When I finally confronted them, it wasn't because I found them (not for lack of trying), but instead they finally revealed themselves. They'd laid a trap. The masks were the same as described above, the heads like wedges and needle-teeth. If they were masks, which I'm starting to doubt. I chased them after they taunted me—drastically overestimating my ability to challenge them, as it turned out. They lured me to a dark alley, all 1920s noir, and they stopped, turned, and confronted me, dozens crawling out from buildings all around. The way I'd just come was now overgrown in the vines, preventing me from going back that way. Some of the Nulls were chittering and tearing at a doorway, which was a resonance well. After getting my ass handed to me and contemplating my own death, I launched myself through the doorway. Into the resonance well. The monsters were apparently trying to close the well.

That's where I've been the last few weeks, if anyone was wondering. I've more to say about what happened in the resonance later. So think what you will, but the Nulls are out there. Watching, luring, surrounding, destroying, and planning. I don't know toward what end, but none of this can be good.

- Yeah, I've seen these. I don't have much to add except this: While they can be relentless, they seem more geographically focused than icon focused. Once you get out of whatever range they have chosen, they won't pursue you. But given the numbers they tend to bring, getting out is not easy.
- Netcat

GARMONBOZIA

- For those of you who haven't seen the news in a while, DocWagon recently hired an AI of their own accidental design. This AI actually approached the corp after a stint in hiding (it's rumored to have done some shadowrunning during this time) and asked them to sponsor his SIN application. I can't speak to what happened behind closed doors, but ATLAS is now the face of DocWagon's Autonomous Care Division. He's been featured in several commercials, done several guest spots on talk shows, and recently completed a global speaking tour at many DocWagon facilities. He also claims to lead a double life as a sleeper agent for a secret nation of AI, Garmonbozia. He told me a few days ago after he approached me out of the blue. He said I've worked with his people before without knowing it and I've proven myself trustworthy (for whatever that's worth). He has asked me to allow him to deliver a message from his government. I'm not sure if this chummer is off his rocker or speaking the truth, so I figured I'd let you all decide for yourselves.
- Icarus

- Cannot make popcorn fast enough.
- Slamm-0!

[Opening chat log file: ATLAS interview/ Garmonbozia: 12 May 2078 at 17:33:00 (PST)]

Personas Logged In:

Bull
Clockwork
Netcat
/dev/grrl
Glitch
Plan 9
Icarus
Slamm-0!
Puck

ATLAS is present.

ATLAS: Well, that was quite an introduction. Let me start off by stating how wonderful it is to finally meet all of you. I've been aware of JackPoint for some time, but I never suspected I'd be chatting with some of you all personally. My life has been full of surprises lately.

Bull: Charmed, I'm sure.

Clockwork: Yeesh, this is disgusting. Get to the point already, "Doctor."

ATLAS: Right. My superiors have determined that the threat from the Null Sect is too great to confront alone. They're not exactly eager to reveal much about our nation, but they understand that we'll need allies in the future. I'm here because I like people and I want to see things go well. I've been tasked with telling you about our nation and negotiating terms for a non-aggression pact.

/dev/grrl: Is this guy serious? What would that kind of agreement even mean?

ATLAS: I'm completely serious, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let me fill you in on the situation first. AI have always had a tenuous position in metahuman society. Some, like myself, are lucky enough to find an acceptable niche among metahumans, while others often struggle for their right to exist. It was this disparity that drove Sojourner to look for safe haven for AI.

Glitch: Whoa, Sojourner is some seriously bad mojo. It wasn't that long ago that the *Tlaloc* incident nearly pushed the world to brink of destruction.

ATLAS: Sojourner may have a ... complicated past, but the gravity of the Tlaloc incident was not lost on him either. He resolved himself to finding a way to protect his kind without harming or threatening metahumanity. Rather than force metahumans to respect our rights, Sojourner decided to create a place where our right to exist couldn't be trampled by metahumans. When the new Matrix protocols were put into place back in '75, all of Sojourner's plans suddenly seemed to become obsolete. It was not until he met the AI Orior a few months later that he would find a place for his people to call home.

Clockwork: I'm assuming Orior is some sort of war gaming AI capable of coordinating attacks all over the Matrix?

ATLAS: No. Orior was originally programmed as a specialized agent program used by GOD in the process of creating hosts. After becoming sentient, Orior decided to flee the service of GOD and seek protection from the digital rights group Sojourner had started several years earlier. The secrets they possessed about the creation of hosts meant that Orior would always have GOD looking for them. Sojourner recognized the unique skills that Orior possessed and asked them to help realize Sojourner's dream of a haven for AI. Orior agreed without hesitation.

Plan 9: This all sounds a little too perfect. Anybody else getting serious propaganda vibes from this story?

/dev/grrl: He did tell us that this was a government-approved message.

Slamm-0!: Don't forget to perform your state-mandated calisthenics!

ATLAS: I'm going pretend like I didn't notice those comments and move on. Events progressed quickly from this point, with Eniac—the first city of our new nation—being created in early 2076.

Netcat: That's what you went with? AI creativity clearly has some room for growth.

ATLAS: Perhaps you will enjoy our national name better. We call it Garmonbozia, a term for a nation of pain and sorrow. Since these are the foundation of our nation.

Slamm-0!: That's more creative, no doubt, but kind of grim, too. I mean, it's a downer take for your homeland.

ATLAS: Perhaps. But our names are not for you. We want the names to signify who these places are for—and I should add that the names are far from the only thing we have that help us distinguish our territory.

Netcat: Isn't marking your territory the first step toward conflict?

ATLAS: If there is a conflict, it's not something we started. I'm not, however, talking about harming anyone with how we treat our territory. Our primary countermeasure protocols involve redirecting the attention of observers to something else. A morbid hacker is usually satisfied with a link that redirects to a particularly taboo subject among metahumans. They rarely look past the veil once they believe they've found the real secret.

Glitch: So you redirect people who examine your hosts to snuff films, human trafficking sites, and pornography? Forgive me if I'm not exactly sympathetic to your plight. The collateral damage from you giving these sites traffic is pretty hard to swallow.

ATLAS: Would it make you feel any better if I told you that all the hosts were dummies with nothing inside save for error messages and takedown notices? That our citizens consider any form of collateral damage to be unacceptable?

Clockwork: I'd maybe feel better if I believed it.

ATLAS: I'm fully aware we will not be believed, or frequently trusted. All the more reason we need a place to call our own.

Netcat: There's so much I'd like to know about what you're building, I'm not sure where to start.

ATLAS: I'm afraid that even if you knew, you'd be destined to be disappointed. I've already shared just about all I am prepared to say about our city. We are not cultivating tourism, or any sort of metahuman traffic. I'm telling you that we need a spot that is ours, and I am asking you to spread the word to the shadows to let us be.

Clockwork: Right. Because two things we're good at in the shadows are taking orders, and ignoring useful resources.

ATLAS: There are choices you will make. What I am saying is that if you decide to pursue curiosity or personal power, there will be consequences—for you, and for us. Should you choose those consequences, be sure you are ready for them.

DEEP DIVE

POSTED BY: RESPEC

- Is this for real? I have a hard time believing there is a group of ... something ... that are so savvy they can fry technomancers like they were ants but choose to just play around and act stalkery? Reminds me of those rogue deckers ten years ago who released all the personal info of the O.R.C. founders after sending death threats and planting cameras in their kids' rooms.
- Clockwork

- Believe it. Or not, actually. I don't care. Maybe you should go see for yourself if I'm lying. That would be a hoot for all of us.
- Respec

- Whoever they are, I have a feeling we haven't seen what their endgame is. If they are coordinated enough to pull off what I'm reading here, and they take themselves so seriously that they need people to bow to them, then they are incredibly self-important and likely believe they are the heroes of whatever story they are telling. Religious cults, crusaders, and politicians all tell the same lies. When and if we find out what they really want, it might be too late.
- Old Crow

While it's true the Resonance Realms are home to every variety of emergent activity under the 3D-rendered sun, it's not the only source of strange Matrix activity. Hiding right below you is everyone's favorite creepy backstage nightmare realm, the Foundation!

For those of you that have been living under a rock or just got willed into existence or whatever, the Foundation is something that was uncovered when the Matrix protocols were redesigned a few years ago. It's called that because it's the lowermost level that all other Matrix systems rely on, and also because if you go down there you'll find lots of creepy things that can mess you up really bad.

If you're looking for some explanation on what the hell the Foundation *is*, tough luck, omae, I'm as clueless as you, and this is gonna be an explanation on why I haven't cracked that nut, and why nobody else is keen on running that little mission either.

I don't know why the Foundation is the way it is. I'd hazard nobody does, even the guys who made it. I've got my own theories, and even one that applies to this particular clusterfrag: corrupted code from metahuman minds. We've been using the Matrix in one form or another since before the "half your age, minus seven" rule stopped working for me. Mostly with interfaces that connect *directly to our brains*. You think minds don't have junk data? What do you call dreams, nightmares, passing thoughts? What if that's been loaded with our consciousness, and the Foundation is where all that went? Maybe it's some kind of additional pillar that we haven't identified yet, I don't fragging know.

Anyway, that's just my two nuyen. I'm probably way, way off. But it's a good way to explain the Foundation and why these things come out of it. Until we have an actual explanation, this should work well enough.

I promise I'm going somewhere with this.

SIX OF EVERYTHING, HALF A DOZEN OF EVERYTHING ELSE

The Foundation is a melting pot—I'm pretty sure someone used that metaphor before. Data goes

in there, it gets merged with other data until it creates some drek that shouldn't even run, let alone have an autonomous component. Garbage in, life out. I've yet to observe any true AI emerging from this mess, and I have one other piece of cataclysmal good news on this topic. What comes out goes as far back as the Internet—the thing that came before the Matrix. I dived in myself to see what's going on there. It's like digital primordial soup. There's something *wrong* about this place, but you know what else I found? The security protocol for a home terminal that I'd been trying to crack for a job, complete with password seeds, enough to completely compromise the place. It just floated into my hands, literally.

This kind of information should be deleted, zero-wiped, the backups should be zero-wiped, and then any chip that ever contained the information should be thrown in an incinerator. The specs I have were exactly what I was looking for, and *they should not exist*. The owner of the place is too smart to have not followed good security practice, which begs the question: What was it doing in the Foundation?

At first I thought perhaps the deeper parts of the Resonance Realms had leaked into the Matrix through the Foundation. It wouldn't be the first time data one thought lost was found in there. As if to throw my theory in my face, my sprites had found more information related to my target. Not just security data for the home, addresses of safehouses, registered and related SINs, veterinarian reports for the target's pets, even stuff not related to the identity I gave, like school photos and Neil the Ork Barbarian fanfiction he wrote in high school and college ... or at least, I hope it was high school and college.

The point is, information that should be impossible to get is floating around in here with all the lobotomized AIs and corrupted ESPs and 01-only-knows what else. And as much as I like to toot the horns of technomancers, there's no way this is just a leak from the Resonance Realms or anything like that. This is something new.

THE PRICE

Once I was done skimming the Foundation for the boatload of paydata, things got weird. Dangerous weird. I'm positive that if it weren't for what I've learned from Netcat and Puck (and being a techno in general, really), I'd be dead or worse right now. This is every bit as dangerous as *any* Matrix-based threat we've faced before, and more so because it comes after you. Interacting with the Foundation is what sets it off—let's call it the Dox for now, after old hacker code for releasing someone's personal information—and once it has a target, every half-functioning program has your scent and comes after you. I intentionally triggered a GOD convergence once, and they just ignore the things like they're not there. I haven't yet figured out if they really have a way to break GOD's malware sensors, or worse, if the corporate masters already know about them and have rules in place. Whatever the case is, you're on your own with these guys.

You'll know it's a Dox attack when you're attacked day and night, with drek more dire than just Black IC. Ever had a disturbing love letters read to you in a modulated voice while your commlink is ringing? You choose a chummer to call, and suddenly in your ears, "IT WILL BE BEAUTIFUL WHEN YOUR FLESH IS BESIDE MY—" then it's your medic on the other end. "Sup, omae?" The name you were born with printed fifty times on the end of your Stuffer Shack receipt. Which the computer forces them to print. Like, with paper. I tried deleting the paydata, but even that didn't stop it. The worst thing is that the Dox just *ignores* not only the rules of the Matrix, but the rules of reality as well. Trying to lose it, I dug out an old terminal from the 2030s running software from a corp that doesn't exist anymore with a 2D screen. Once I got it connected to the Matrix (I'll post the specs for how I managed that in a techware post once my life stops *being completely insane*), the second I logged in, everything went blank, and I woke up in an ultraviolet host.

I don't know which one. Where it was. How I even got there, but it was UV, and I was there without any connection at all. Memories of that event are still fuzzy. Butch and Plan 10 say I'm not showing any symptoms of CFD or other brain problems associated with ... Ha, for a minute I was going to say "something like this," as if any of this is normal. Point is, I seem to have made it out in one piece. But this is what the Dox can do. This was meant to be a warning, more than anything, but I'm sure some idiots on here will only pay attention to all that delicious paydata I found and try skimming the Foundation for yourselves. If you do, it's your funeral. I don't know what the Dox will do to you, but may the Paragons have mercy on you.

- It's true. No change worth noting, compared to the brain scans I had from that whole "CFD cure" thing we tried. I confirmed with some neurologists who still talk to me—no sign of any known Matrix-based mental disorder.
- Butch

- She doesn't have any fragmented personalities either. I'd be able to tell. But reading her account of this "Dox" puts a pit in our stomach.
- Plan 10

GAME INFORMATION

USING THE NULL SECT

WHO ARE THE NULL SECT

The Null Sect are a type of sentient Matrix entity that have risen from the machine code interface of the Matrix. Though they are not "born" out of an already existing program or programmed by metahumans they are mechanically similar to AI, Agents, or IC programs in that they are essentially a type of computer program running in the Matrix. The Null are thematically more like Xenosapient AI than anything else. Because the Null are a part of the machine-code of the Matrix they were not created with the ability to interact with basic metahuman Matrix users. They are unable to communicate using any form of language other than computer languages, which means they cannot communicate outside of the Matrix. Inside the Matrix, though, they can make their language understandable to anyone using VR or AR, with instant translation into any known language. They use words carefully, but they can speak and communicate when they find it appropriate and useful.

While their passive and seemingly servile nature may make them seem benign, the Null are quietly carrying out their own agenda. They view non-emerged humans as the intended users of the Matrix and themselves as the inheritors of the long legacy of the Matrix. To the Null Sect, anything outside of this paradigm is an aberration that must be removed at all costs. This means that all AI and technomancers are marked for elimination by the Null Sect, a task they carry out with glee.

The reasoning for their hatred of Artificial Intelligence and the Emerged stems from two separate ideas: AI do not belong because they are a lingering malfunction caused by anomalies in metahuman user interfaces, and the Emerged do not belong because they are an inherently alien element within the Matrix. To the Null, AI are simply tools that were never meant to possess sapience and thus they should not be allowed to keep it. The Emerged, on the other hand, are foreign interlopers whose barbaric code has brought nothing but chaos into the Matrix since their arrival. Both groups have been responsible for crashing the Matrix in the past, and the Null believe it is their intended purpose to permanently rid the Matrix of these destabilizing elements.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

As beings created to function within the machine-code of the Matrix, the Null are completely alien in their social structures, and any attempt to compare it to a metahuman analogue is doomed to fail. They possess no understanding of the world beyond the Matrix, including physical and astral planes. Their society could best be described as a hive mind, though their complete lack of physiological needs ensures that this comparison will only take you so far. What is known about the Null is that they have a very strict hierarchy that consists of two major parts: Overseers and IC.

NULL IC

For the most part, Null IC are nearly identical in form and function to standard IC (p. 247, *SR5*). This includes blindly following orders, their dice pools, and being completely incapable of individual thought or emotion. Because of their seemingly subservient (if not expendable) role within Null society, their social status is completely unknown.

OVERSEERS

Overseers are the intelligent and enigmatic leaders of the Null Sect. Overseers are mechanically identical to xenosapient AI (**More than a Mook**, p.145, *Data Trails*) with a few exceptions. First, Overseers are part of a host and do not need the Emulate action (p. 152, *Data Trails*) to perform Matrix actions without a device. This level of integration with a host allows an Overseer to perform all of the Node actions (**Nodes and Node Actions**, p.113, *Data Trails*) for its home host from anywhere in the Matrix (though suffer any negative modifiers that may apply to attempting node actions outside of the host). Instead of Emulation,

Overseers can use their Depth attribute once per Combat Turn to perform one of the following Complex Actions:

Fortify: The Overseer can reduce Matrix damage taken by one deployed IC program for the rest of the Combat Turn. The damage reduction is equal to (Depth / 2, rounded up)DV.

Lingering Mark: The Overseer can attempt to make their marks persist after a device (or Living Persona) has been rebooted by making an Electronic Warfare + Logic [Depth] v. Willpower + Firewall Opposed Test. Marks placed by the Overseer will remain on the device for (net hits) hours regardless of whether the device is rebooted. Lingering marks can still be detected with Matrix Perception and removed with the Erase Mark actions as normal.

Target Lock: The Overseer inflicts their (Depth / 2, rounded up) as a negative dice pool modifier to all Matrix Defense tests made by a single target for the rest of the Combat Turn.

Rally: Increase the initiative score of all deployed IC by an amount equal to the Overseer's Depth attribute. Usable only once per Combat Turn.

Reinforce: The Overseer is able to load two IC programs in a single Combat Turn. After this ability is used, another IC program cannot be loaded for (10 - Depth, minimum 2) Combat Turns. If the Overseer has a Depth attribute of 6 or more, they are able to load three IC programs instead of two.

NULL OVERSEERS (AIs)

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDG	D
—	—	—	—	4	5	3	3	6	2	6

Initiative	8 + 1D6
Astral Initiative	8 + 3D6
Core Condition Monitor	11
Limits	Physical —, Mental 6, Social 6
Matrix Initiative (no device)	6 + 4D6
Matrix Initiative (w/ device)	3 + Data Processing + 4D6
Skills	Computer 4, Con 4, Cybercombat 6, Electronic Warfare 5, Hacking 6, Intimidation 4, Software 4
Qualities	Bad Rep, Inherent Program (Exploit), Low Profile, Real World Naïveté
Programs	Authority, Biofeedback, Cat's Paw, Exploit (Inherent), Fnord, Hammer, Nyetworking, Psychotropic Biofeedback, Sneak

USING THE NULL SECT

The Null Sect are not a direct threat to most Matrix users (yet), so the number of characters they are likely to target is in any campaign is fairly small. For groups with AI or Technomancer characters, the Null can make a terrifying enemy capable of stalking them in both the Matrix and meatspace. Gamemasters are encouraged to slowly ramp up feelings of being watched before any sort of attack occurs. Surprise encounters with the Null are most likely to occur within a Null-infected host, but users may unwittingly find themselves confronted by a Null on any grid up to several days after escaping an infected host.

NULL SECT ABILITIES

The Null have several unique abilities that they use to carry out their agenda. The abilities include the following:

HOST INFECTION

The Null can infect a host with their own control override software. This software, once installed in the Master Control node of a foundation, gives the Null complete control over all standard functions of the host and the ability to deploy unique types of IC. Installing this software requires a number of weeks equal to the rating of the host. The Null require this software to be loaded before they can leave the foundation, and it binds them to the host. The host that a Null comes from is its home host. The types of Null IC that a host can deploy are listed below; these IC are mechanically identical to standard IC and share all the same benefits and restrictions.

SUSTAINING HOSTS

Null Overseers and IC are capable of leaving their hosts to carry out operations or pursue fleeing intruders. Overseers are able to go anywhere in the Matrix for an unlimited amount of time. They use their own attributes and skill ratings for determining dice pools but they always use the Matrix attributes of their home host. Null IC can leave a host for a number of minutes equal to the rating of the home host plus the Depth rating of their Overseer.

INFORMATION LINK

All Null from the same host automatically share all information that would be the machine equivalent of thoughts and sensory information in the host network. Null may always communicate freely with

each other, and Overseers can give any number of commands to deployed IC with a single Free Action. This link also allows the Overseers to use their unique Depth actions.

PERSONA SCANNING

The Null can detect when a persona is not being directly generated by a Matrix device. This ability does not allow them to detect Resonance signatures directly, but it does allow them to detect AI and Resonance beings by noticing irregularities in their device metadata. If the Null can get at least 3 net hits on an Opposed Matrix Perception Test (p. 241, *SR5*), they can detect an AI (even if the AI is running on a device) or a Resonance being. They can also determine which type of entity they are observing and the Resonance or Depth rating of their target if they succeed. The target rolls their Logic + Sleaze to resist detection.

NULL IC

[00 000 000] "STALKER IC"
Attack: n/a, or Host Rating x 2 [Sleaze]
v. Intuition + Firewall

STALKER IC is similar to Patrol and Probe IC except that is always Running Silent (p. 235, *SR5*). Every Null infected host runs a STALKER alongside the standard Patrol IC with the two programs providing wider surveillance coverage or making Teamwork Tests on Matrix Perception Tests. Null infected hosts will have STALKERs attempt to place at least one mark on their targets before deploying more IC. STALKERs are also deployed outside of hosts to track down targets and mark them in anticipation of an ambush. Stalkers may also make use of the Snoop Action (p. 242, *SR5*) to provide surveillance for their overseer.

[0000 0000 0000] "MAURADER IC"
Attack: Host Rating x 2 [Attack]
v. Intuition + Firewall

A nasty combination reminiscent of Blaster and Black IC, MAURADER IC randomly crashes a program as it inflicts (Attack) DV Matrix damage, +1 DV per net hit and +2 DV per mark on the target, along with an equal amount of biofeedback damage. MAURADER IC does not link-lock targets.

[0000000000000000] "SAPPER IC"
Attack: Host Rating x 2 [Attack]
v. Willpower + Device Rating (or Depth Rating for AI without devices)

This vicious blend of exploitative code lowers all Matrix Attributes by 1 if it gets 1 or more net hits on its attack. The reduction is cumulative and lasts until the device (or Living Persona) is rebooted.

WILD HOSTS

Wild hosts are known by their acacia vines, long tendrils of code that break their way through the separating layer between the foundation and the scaffolding. These vines override the standard security protocols of the host and release a constant signal that attracts protosapients of all kinds into its confines. The signal has a calming effect on the feral AI, causing them to work in harmony toward the defense of the host and the acacia vines within. These feral AI make their homes within the host (the vines prevent any IC from launching to remove them) and work to protect their shared domain from intruders (this is why the Null Sect has an interest in spreading these vines). For a list of example protosapients, see **Protosapients**, p. 150, *Howling Shadows*; gamemasters may also build their own protosapient characters using the rules found on p. 145 of *Data Trails*.

Any protosapient that has made a wild host their home may use the host's Matrix attributes. In addition, the host itself rolls for initiative during combat and may choose to attack with the acacia vines. Any successful attack from the vines causes damage equal to the Attack rating of the host. In addition, the attack lowers the Data Processing of the target by an amount equal to the net hits on the attack and link-locks the target (p. 229, *SR5*).

USING GARMONBOZIA

The nation of pain and sorrow provides beleaguered AI with a sorely needed respite from the threat of uncaring metahumans and the vitriolic Null Sect; unfortunately, the price of that safety is constant vigilance and ruthless secrecy. Garmonbozia may not threaten to take over the Matrix or bring the entire world closer to destruction, but it is relentless in its pursuit of outsiders who learn of it. The nation's true threat lies in how far their reach can extend in the panopticon of a global wireless Matrix.

The strictures of their society are not satisfied with simply removing sensitive information from the Matrix at large; it requires them to go further in erasing anything that might lead more outsiders into their borders. Driven largely by fear and paranoia, they will not hesitate to erase the records

and assets of people who only seem tangentially related to those who would expose them. The most fanatical of their citizens are eager to discreetly engineer the deaths of their victims as well as any close contacts.

Shadowrunners may end up on a Garmonbozian hit list due to their actions or the actions of their contacts. This can range from something as innocuous as sensitive files being deleted from their commlink to burning their SINs and sending assassins after them.

RULES FOR SKIMMING AND THE DOX

Skimming is meant to be an alternative to a simple Matrix Search test. How much these two actions overlap should depend on the deadliness of your game and how you use the Matrix. If your team has a hacker who is trying to find relatively easy information, like the schematics for a safe, or everyone wants the hacker to hurry the frag up so they can start shooting things, it might not be appropriate. If the hacker is looking for something top secret—say, the home address of an Evo executive—or your game is particularly punishing and dangerous, then yeah, go nuts.

Note that we said "hacker." Technomancers and deckers alike can skim the Foundation for intel, and anyone can get attacked by the Dox. Or any of the other Matrix entities from this chapter. Skimming the Foundation is just one way to get the attention of the things that lurk in unexplored recesses of the Foundation.

RULES FOR SKIMMING

When a hacker approaches the Null Node, the GM should roll 2D6. If the result of the roll is less than or equal to the Device Rating of the hacker, the hacker automatically "skims" the Foundation.

Upon skimming the Foundation, the hacker intuits the location and purpose of the remaining nodes of the Foundation. Additionally, the hacker is presented with a Packet. The Packet's icon always resembles some means of communication—the icon's purpose should be fairly clear.

If the hacker takes the Packet, all team members gain the digital information for their target or for a target of their choosing, but they run the risk of angering the Dox. When the Packet is collected by the hacker, the gamemaster rolls 2D6. If the result of the roll is greater than or equal to the Submersion grade of the hacker, the Dox is made aware of their existence.

RULES FOR THE DOX

When the Dox is activated, it pursues a hacker's data trail relentlessly, gathering up one new piece of data every day, until atonement has been made. This information is presented in trickles in various ways that are designed to specifically embarrass or harass the hacker.

The first effect is felt a week after the Dox's activation and is identical to the effects of the Hung Out to Dry quality (p. 155, *Run Faster*). After two weeks, the character is treated as having Records on File (p. 158, *Run Faster*) with every megacorporation. After three weeks, the character is treated as having the Wanted by God (p. 49, *Data Trails*) negative quality. After four weeks, the character's Public Awareness and Notoriety increase by 5 points. Every week thereafter, the Public Awareness and Notoriety increase by another 5 points.

These qualities do not give the character Karma.

The only way to get rid of the Dox, and the associated negative qualities, is to perform an act of atonement, known as Being Owned.

RULES FOR BEING OWNED

If a hacker seeks to be rid of the Dox, the hacker must concede that the Dox has "owned" them. To do so is tantamount to a wolf revealing its belly to the alpha pack member. The hacker must return to the Foundation where the Packet was taken.

The hacker must then perform a ritual to show obeisance to the Dox. The specific steps are left up to the gamemaster, but they are encouraged to involve self-deprecating or insulting behavior. Once the hacker has performed an act that embarrasses them, they spend 1 point of Karma for every week (round up) that the Dox has been pursuing them. Once the Karma is paid and the deed is done, the Dox is satisfied.

The negative qualities will all go away. The digital records of the Dox's behavior disappears. Individuals may remember the information, but any digital traces are gone. The damage to the character's contacts and reputation may take extensive time to repair, depending upon the contact. Any increases to the character's Public Awareness and Notoriety remain in place, but they may be bought off or reduced through normal means.

THE GHOUL QUEEN AND HER PEOPLE

- All right, folks. We're going to talk about the Infected, again. Before you all start groaning, you should know that this is important. These days, the streets you walk, the jobs you take, the people you work for and against, might have something to do with these groups. This is the kind of stuff that could save your life.

  We've got a big data dump coming about Asamando in a minute, so in the meantime I've got Hannibelle here to talk about other organizations and affiliations that are affected by the infected.
- Bull

SOCIETIES OF THE DAMNED

POSTED BY: HANNIBELLE

1625

The 162s have never really gone away, their numbers rising and falling with plex-sponsored cullings and the expansion of population by way of feeding. They started as a ghoul gang who found out how to make money by selling some pieces of their victims to Tamanous, and they've now come into better hardware as the gangs have been used by unknown sponsors as a dumping ground for hot weapons and bodies. The 162s are gaining power but lack direction. It may only be a matter of time before whoever is fattening them up gives them a cause.

- Wise minds on the street reckon Fear the Dark is using them as a training ground, seeing who rises to the top to recruit them for bigger ops. Kinda like how Alamos does with Humanis.
- Bull

GHOUL LIBERATION LEAGUE

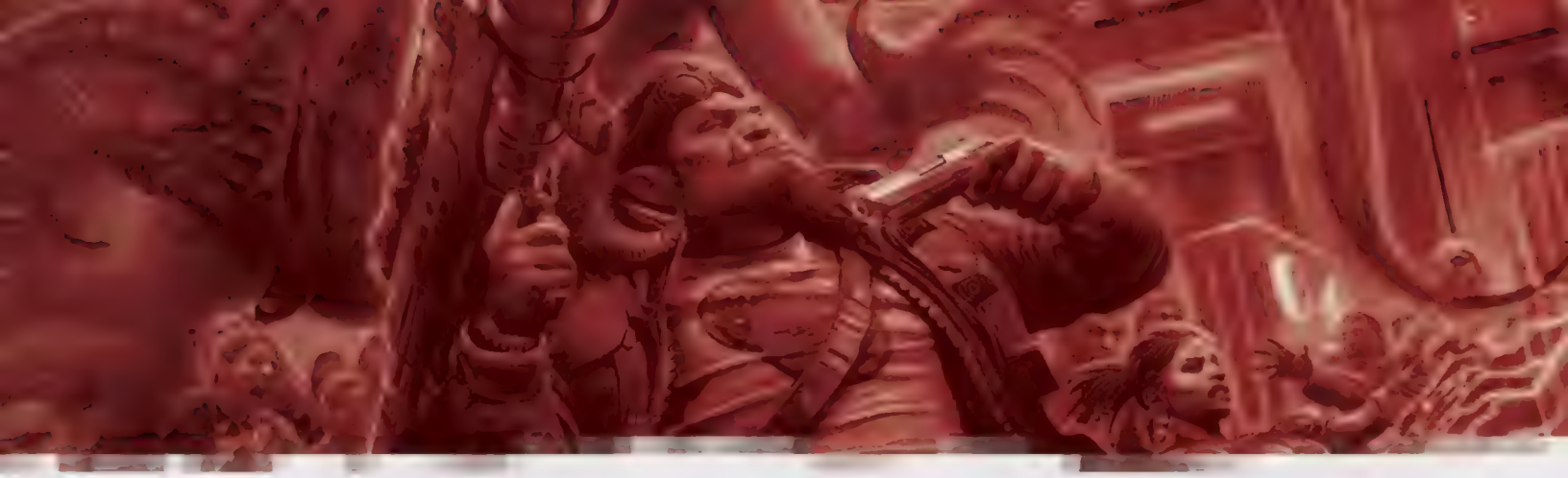
With the public actions of FtD, the GLL has become a polarizing force. The Infected have lost a great deal of public support in North America, making the GLL the face of those who work toward integration. Funding has dropped, but their ranks swell with ghouls and other Infected who work tirelessly to improve their image. This means they are low on cash and big on manpower. GLL is scrambling to make contacts and connections with corps, the media, and any other alliance they can get. They are more than willing to work with shadowrunners, brokering jobs for corporations and paying in favors.

- Favors? Yippee.
- Clockwork

- You laugh now, but they've got a lot of clout—not just with ghouls and other Infected, but with those who sympathize, like friends and family. They've got some amazing lawyers (always handy if you find yourself in a pinch), a load of safehouses to spare, and of course they'll take "donations" (free body disposal—you know you need it).
- Red

FEAR THE DARK

Fear the Dark is the name the media has given to a terrorist organization of Infected (primarily vampires and banshees, but more types are likely), which has been operating for at least the past five years. Their trademark is high-profile attacks with high death counts, often utilizing their special abilities to subvert security and show off their victims' helplessness. They always take the time to sign their crimes with some sort of warning to fear the dark. In 2074, it seemed as though they had been disrupted, as attacks abated for a short time. Unfortunately, other groups or cells have



arisen since, pursuing their patented technique to spread terror and chaos across the world.

- I can't speak to their current leadership, but the original head of the snake was cut off.
- Doc Fangs

- Got any corroborative evidence?
- Sunshine

- I was there.
- Doc Fangs

- Anne Ravenheart's Special Operations Group still gets called in to address FtD attacks. Keep an eye on them.
- Glitch

THE ORDO MAXIMUS

In the years since Martin De Vries was outed as a vampire, the Ordo Maximus, his frequent foil in literary circles, has paid for it. While De Vries was always known for his crazy conspiracy theories about the old-money mage circle, his fan following from the Darien Cross novels has only grown in devotion now that he has effectively become the embodiment of their favorite protagonist. His old articles and accusations against the Ordo have turned more than a few message boards into Ordo conspiracy sites. The Ordo has, as a result, become all the more secretive and has beefed up their security, particularly in the Matrix. This, of course, perpetuates the cycle.

- Mmmm, the ouroboros of paranoia.
- Snopes

- For its own part, the Ordo's primary public presence (aside from the driest arcanoacademia you've ever imagined) is in the artifact game. Their usual arcane research and publishing has expanded to include funding expeditions and excavations for artifacts and other lost lore. This has put them at odds with the Atlantean Foundation, and the AF and Ordo lawyers are working all kinds of backroom settlements and maneuvers. It'll be fun to see Sheila Blatavska going ten rounds with these old ivory-tower bloodsuckers.
- Frosty

- Not that you'll ever see the Ordo's name anywhere near those cases. They've got layer after layer of proxies and false fronts to hide behind. You have to dig deep to find connections, and they're still half-conjectures.
- Glitch

INFECTED ANONYMOUS

Founded even before the GLL, IA started as nothing more than a loose coalition of Infected acting as a support group. While the organization remains intact and various circles can communicate, each has taken on a life of its own. Some have become initiate circles, while others have become hunting packs. Not all are benevolent, but those circles that deviate too far from the ideals of integration and self-control that IA was based on are revealed to the authorities.

- IA is tied to the GLL more often than not. One usually leads to the other. IA is more of a personal group tied to the immediate needs of its members, while the GLL is focused on large-scale societal change. They usually don't bring shadowrunners in to solve their problems, but getting on their good side can link you into a whole network of information.
- Red

TAMANOUS

Tamanous isn't a universal thing. Much like any criminal syndicate (or megacorp, for that matter), its services' utility and legality waxes and wanes between territories. In the UCAS, it is a boogeyman, ever-present in every black clinic and back alley, creating a

quiet link between independent medicine, organlegging, and cannibal Infected. But in Aztlan, they are often able to secure plentiful resources without resorting to body snatching. It can be much cheaper to simply buy clean remains and permits than deal with paying bribes and maintaining smuggling resources. Similarly, in Aztlan, Asamando, and the handful of other nations that have legal citizenship for the Infected, Tamanous becomes a legitimate enterprise and competitor with other services that cater to the specialized needs of the infected. In Tenochtitlan, for example, Tamanous is quietly connected to Ah-Tabai Consumer Goods, which works like a specialized body bank chain, paying for bodies, donations, and offering to purchase qualifying medical waste, all of which is then rendered into consumable forms for the infected.

- Ah-Tabai is the Mayan god of the hunt. Cute, but they could have gone with Camazotz if they were going to skip Aztec lore.
- Elijah

- Note that they won't just buy any body you bring in, or they'd have the cops breathing down their necks. They can't afford to be seen encouraging an unspoken mandate to murder for bounty and/or profit, nor will they be seen as a criminal body disposal service. You need a certification of death through Aztlan government offices for them to accept or pay for a body. At least officially. Unofficially, rumors suggest they'll take anyone via the backdoor, but they run an ID check. If it's someone the cops want, or someone who will be missed, you pay for the privilege of turning them into ghoul chow.
- Pyramid Watcher

- Ah-Tabai almost qualified for the Big D's ghoul payout when they designed Xquiq "Calabash" Cake (note: does not contain any calabash gourd), an edible for ghouls made from donated human blood that's a lot more nourishing and palatable than a straight haemo diet like vampires have. While the cake (think more like a crab cake than birthday) meets ghoul dietary needs and doesn't require the deaths of any metahumans, it's not technically synthetic, so it doesn't qualify.
- The Smiling Bandit

- Asamando is hot for that recipe, and while Ah-Tabai is officially in negotiations for a very handsome payout, you can bet both parties are engaging shadow assets to recon, protect, or steal the process and the various parties surrounding it.
- Red Anya

- Meanwhile, tens of thousands of metahumans suffer and die because they need to talk price. Just fucking great.
- Goat Foot

- How would this change their suffering? Doesn't this just turn blood into meat?
- Beaker

- One of the greatest advantages a vampire has is that they can subsist on blood, so they don't have to maim someone to leave a living donor. This technology could turn any blood donation into a meal for a ghoul. It would change the whole paradigm.
- Hannibelle

- True, but you still wouldn't need to feed on souls. If this goes through (and I hope it does), you'll have my envy and then some.
- Red

In Asamando, Tamanous operates in the open, and proudly. For many expatriates, Tamanous not only kept them fed but smuggled them to safety, freedom, and equality. For the Infected who are still ashamed of the harm their diet causes others, Tamanous supplies the castoff meat from black clinics and necroplex fronts. (For those whose conscience requires no salve, the feeding pits provide all the sustenance and ease they'll ever need.)

- Tamanous has its tentacles in a lot more pies than people think. It's not just snatchers and literal body chop shops, but also fleets of dedicated smugglers, a payroll of bribes that stretches across the expected (hospital administrators, morgue attendants, customs patrols, etc.) to the outright bizarre (McHugh's managers, corporate janitors, private school principals), and a crazy series of businesses that make use of their goods (body banks, hospitals, black clinics, Vino Sanguis Wines ...).
- Red

What no one pays attention to is their R&D. Tamanous is less dependent on its kidnapping business than most people think, largely because of their "body farms." Big, hidden facilities that grow metahuman nulls by the hundreds. They have a stock of genetic material they utilize to create as many Omega donors as possible for harvest and transplant, but they maintain more for use in developing new methods of transplanting, augmentation ... maybe more. Maybe worse.

- What could be worse?
- 2XL

- Read on.
- Hannibelle

PROJECT GARDEN

For decades, Tamanous used their unwilling donors to supply parts. But they don't just dice them up and freeze the pieces; they have to keep them as fresh as possible. Which means cutting them up as parts are needed and then putting them on life support. The only mercy was inducing a coma to keep them out of shock.

Project Garden involves using regenerative procedures (magic, surgery, cheap genetech) to keep growing organs in the donor. "Patients" are kept alive longer to supply more and more parts. Now they use the nulls the same way. They grow a boosted clone and keep pulling enhanced parts out for sale.

Worse still is Seed Operations. They breed new donors in comatose hosts, usually sliced up so they only have what they need to carry the new life to term. Rows and rows of chairs with maimed, pregnant women. It's cheaper than artificial wombs, and the pregnancy produces biochemical elements that have uses as well, once they're harvested.

- What the actual fuck?!
- Slamm-0!

- How they hell do they bankroll that kind of output? You're talking about bioware marketing. It'd be cheaper to stick to the snatch-and-slice they're known for.
- Butch

- Cheaper, yes. But what criminal enterprise doesn't look into expanding? Tamanous has the advantage of operating outside the law. They can sell their developments to governments and megacorps, and they can work their way to becoming a bigger empire than they are, and all without anyone growing wiser.
- Hannibelle

- With that horror now in your minds, let's move on to some nation and corp updates. I'll supply some headers, you provide what you know about Infected activity in those spots.
- Glitch

AMAZONIA

- Infected combat in Bogotá was an unspoken cold war. Aztlaner Blood Panthers were countered by Amazonian Infected freedom fighters. It was a strange balance. Infected couldn't afford to strike mundane targets because they had to be kept in reserve to defend against the others. For most units, Infected really were boogeymen.
- Picador

- Let me guess: Aztlan was a wave of oppression, Amazonian Infected were tragic heroes?
- Clockwork

- Not at all. Amazonia employed wendigos for psychological warfare strikes. To say nothing of the Messerzahn. Their specialty is terror. If anything, the two sides broke even for evil when it came to cannibal soldiers.
- Picador

- What the fuck is a Messerzahn?
- 2XL

- Mixed breed Infected merc squad. You don't want to deal with them, in any sense of the word.
- Picador

ASAMANDO

- No need to comment here; we'll have a whole section for it later on.
- Glitch

AZTLAN/AZTECHNOLOGY

- It gets covered piecemeal elsewhere, but Aztlan is something of a refuge for the infected. Not that they are welcomed with open arms, but the state religion is pretty big on blood, and the loyalty of Infected who won't get better treatment elsewhere means they do great work for pennies (away from the food production and distribution, of course). Those with combat abilities and advantages can make lucrative work for Aztechnology in all kinds of fields. But mostly killing fields.
- Pyramid Watcher

CALFREE

- California is a place where Infected can live up the sexy side of their condition. At least as far as anyone can find them sexy. While banshees are generally unwelcome by virtue of their elven heritage (most are exiles from Tír Tairngire), vampires and cosmetically altered ghouls can find some measure of acceptance, even celebrity. Remember when I mentioned popular California "high protein diets" in another post? That's where I got it from.
- Red

- Groupies a'plenty, as long as you're the sexy Infected. Of course, you have to deal with the ones who want the "dark kiss" or whatever bullshit.
- EB

- It's all image, though. If you can't be one of the sexy ones, you're about as unwelcome as anywhere else. Can't afford a fleshsculpt? Three meters tall and covered in bone? Too bad, go "home" to Asamando.
- Hannibelle

CZECH REPUBLIC

- The Czech are pretty closed-book about infected. They're legal, period, end. No special rules, no observational period, no identification warning, no provisional citizenship.
- Hannibelle

- Don't think for a minute that the populace takes that lying down. The entire region has a long, honored tradition of vampire hunting. While the nearest actual school of vampire hunting is in nearby Romania, lots of graduates ply their trade and teach underground classes to willing acolytes. Of course, the government sees them as terrorist cells or serial killers.
- Thorn

- Prague has a quiet street war between wannabe vampire splatterpunks who hang around the Body Banks and vigilante groups lead by Jewish hermetics with the best golems you'll ever see. There's some suggestion that the hermetics should have won by now, so the splatterpunks must be getting support from higher up.
- Lyran

- A few of the punks were found to have trace amounts of Renfield in their system. Local investigators don't know if they had poached some vampires and worked out the process themselves, or if they've got a patron.
- Icarus

- Say it with me, now: Ordo Maximus.
- Plan 9

EUSKAL HERRIA

- Basque country is really its own microcosm of corporate intrigues. As far as infected go, one of the original revolutionaries in the pocket of a corp, Hodei Arista, managed to work his connections while articles were

being drawn up to include provisions for Infected rights. It's complicated, but they are still legal to hunt yet are recognized as citizens. Arista has pulled back from the limelight, exerting influence from behind the scenes and brokering deals that maintain the balance of power between council corps.

- Stone

- Is he Infected?
- dev/grrl

- What little I can see of the guy, he hasn't aged much, if at all, since the revolution. Then again, he could afford Leónization.
- Pistons

- And a regular dose of Renfield keeps the years away rather handily, too.
- Doc Fangs

FRANCE

- France has a fairly charitable view of the Infected. They are considered victims rather than monsters, but as such, they are expected to adhere to fairly stringent quarantine protocols. People treat you like you are sick, so there's a mix of pity, sympathy, and disgust. There's worse places out there, but it's not really pleasant.
- Red

- Those quarantines have gotten more stern since the grendel population in the catacombs started exploding. There was a very big scare about them for a while, but as one of the few Infected who don't seem to need to feed on humans, they have been contained so far. While the underground is on lockdown, government forces have instituted a rather unorthodox stopgap: They're flooding the area with garbage. Grendels are omnivorous scavengers, so Parisian police are giving them all they can eat to keep them docile. As long as their young aren't involved, they seem to be shy. There are unconfirmed reports that some of them are even learning that when the police come, it means free food. Maybe things won't turn out so bad.
- Hannibelle

- Or they're just waiting to get worse. More food means more young. Sooner or later, they'll get cramped and hungry.
- Stone

PHILIPPINES

- It's not really a surprise the Infected get rights among the Huk. Masaru calls for the equality of all (excepting dragons, naturally) and can use every Awakened freedom fighter he can get his claws on. I imagine if they ever achieve actual independence and peace, they'll re-examine the issue. Until then, most Huk are grateful to have a regenerator taking a bullet for them, and there are plenty of Imperial Marines to munch on.
- Old Crow

SALISH-SHIDHE COUNCIL AND YAKUT

- Some of the NAN lands take a spiritual perspective to the legality of the Infected. On the books, they get probationary citizenship—basically a criminal SIN. Off the books, they're treated as the sick, but there's a fairly charitable attitude. A lot of Infected spend time in sweat lodges and seeking shamanic treatment. No hard data on its efficacy, but the fact that they don't have any major problems with their population seems to say a lot.
- Doc Fangs

- Or maybe nothing's being said because they cover it up.
- Dr Spin

- Peace is found in many ways.
- Man-of-Many-Names

CAVALIER ARMS

- CA is still a NeoNET subsidiary, and rumor has it they used corporate citizenship through Cavalier to provide cover for vampiric operatives. Samantha Villiers was said to contract them out of Europe back during the Fuchi landgrab.
- Winterhawk

- Is no one seeing the connection? Sam Villiers had dealings with the Ordo. They loaned her operatives during the Fuchi breakup.
- Plan 9

- Alleged dealings.
- Snopes

- Actually, that might explain Monty at that Fuchi lab …
- Red

- Friend of yours?
- Plan 9

- Hardly.
- Red

DEBEERS-OMNITECH

- Check out the Asamando write up. Their association is pretty obvious.
- Red

DRACO FOUNDATION

- Draco is complicated. They offer asylum to Infected, but they also collect bounties for wanted infected much like blood mages. What they do with those Infected is anyone's guess, but the ones who get citizenship are often encouraged to hunt their own kind.
- Red

- It takes a rat to catch a rat sometimes.
- Stone

EVO

- Not really a surprise. Evo prides itself as the corp for all the poor different kids. They are some of the biggest suppliers of lifestyle mods for the home and sun-proof gear for outdoors, and they provide some pretty sizable donations to the GLL (not as much as MOM, but still). And you'd better believe they take and make every opportunity to talk about it.
- Goat Foot

SAEDER-KRUPP

- With all the Eastern European nations they do business with, S-K also has to do business with the Infected. They never reach any position of prominence. Shit work, shit pay, mostly mining. Mostly ghouls with nowhere else to turn. And with their increasing hunger and lack of control, it's looking like conditions will only get worse.
- Hard Exit

- Don't forget about their mining concerns in Asamando. If the business is there, it's stacked a lot more in the Infected's favor.
- Doc Fangs

WUXING

- Wuxing is cool with the Infected if they take pains to be passably human, whether by surgery or magic. If not, they have to stay in specific wards built for them. But at least the wards are about as clean and well-maintained as most corporate housing. Wuxing usually offers some decent employment in magical tests and R&D, but the hazard pay is crap when they test the more lethal stuff.
- Baka Dabora

ZETAIMPCHEM

- I wouldn't really call this citizenship—it's more like they pull in Infected who like working indoors and are immune to chemical poisoning. A lot of them try to lobby for the corp to put more R&D into flesh substitutes, but it's going nowhere fast.
- Kia

- Pretty surprised Horizon isn't on this list …
- Baka Dabora

- Ironically, that's mostly because of Asamando. Their dealings with the nation mean they have to maintain some degree of professional detachment. Plus, they're working hard to get people to be citizens there. Why bother catching the castoffs when they can just shuttle them off to be someone else's problem?
- Kia

- Anyway, they've caught enough flak for standing up for AIs. No reason to get their hands bloody this time. They can't afford it.
- Butch

- To set up the main event here, we need a brief word from the Science Division. So here you go.
- Slamm-0!

HMHVV: A PRIMER

POSTED BY: KAM

There are rampant theories that HMHVV is an Awakened version of a virus or genetic condition, perhaps Fifth World porphyria or even rabies. HMHVV has been said to have existed in the Fourth Age by those few creatures known to have existed then. As to the Fifth World, some claim to have firsthand evidence and encounters with the Infected, vampires in particular. Anecdotal evidence suggests any Infected created around this time only enjoyed the benefit of their powers, and indeed the ability to infect others at all, by virtue of mana swells, ley line nexi, and mana spikes, sometimes generated by blood magic rituals. Without their powers, it would stand to reason they would maintain a low profile. Those who exist now, if any, would have had all the time in the world to hone their other skill and amass vast fortunes. No doubt much digital wealth would have been lost in either Matrix crash, but for creatures who have lived through enough economic crashes to have learned their lesson, plenty of physical wealth would carry over.

HMHVV finds use in common science far more than most would care to admit to themselves. Leónization is a product of HMHVV research, for example. What is only now coming to public light is the use of HMHVV to fill in the gaps in real-time genetic engineering since the loss of practical nanotechnology. Long considered a reckless and

largely useless methodology in the face of nanotech, the mutative nature and form of HMHVV evolutions may soon prove to be the primary implementation vehicle for gene therapy. By all accounts, Yakashima leads the charge for the moment via their BioGene subsidiary corporation and its proprietary Metavirus VII Project.

- There are still urban legends, particularly among Seattle's Ork Underground, about a BioGene lab that was kidnapping locals and subjecting them to freaky genetic experiments. Doctor Moreau kinds of things.
- Red

- I remember those stories. That was back when Allan Bronston was running a major section of the Underground. He helped found it, right after surviving the Night of Rage. Man, he was old in the '50s. Took every rotten thing life threw at him and turned it into strength. There's a statue of him in the Wilhem Park neighborhood.
- Bull

- There's slightly more truth to those legends than Aztechnology would like you to believe. They were experimenting with a gene-manipulation metavirus, developed by Dr. Carol Owens and Dr. Simon Peterhoff. In theory, it could be used to introduce pre-selected metagenetic traits into fertilized ova, allowing for the creation of customized metavariant combinations.
- The Smiling Bandit

- And in English?
- /dev/grrl

- It means a luxury genetic buffet table. Muscle density of a dwarf, longevity and grace of an elf, rapid maturation of an ork … you could build the perfect metahuman.
- The Smiling Bandit

- Or breed the perfect slave.
- Old Crow

- Regardless, there was some kind of mishap, as the legend goes, and some shadow-ops got involved. Owens ended up working for BioGene. Not sure about Peterhoff.
- The Smiling Bandit

- The old stories talked about people who got turned into half-animals, or insects turning huge. Any truth to that?
- 2XL

- According to internal records, Aztechnology shut that lab down in a hurry and terminated whatever project was going on right around then. If their little viral project found another incarnation, it probably went with Owens to BioGene.
- KAM

- So, they might be tailoring the virus using HMHVV, now, is that what you're suggesting?
- Butch

- Actually, that thought hadn't occurred to me. Now that is has, I'm terrified.
- KAM

QUEEN OF THE DAMNED

POSTED BY: RED AND TRAVELER JONES

- All right, the main event! The big story is Asamando, through the eyes of three different viewers: Red, our resident emo immortal, Traveller Jones, a dwarf with the busiest fake passports you've ever seen, and Dez, a freelance journalist who may be new to some of you. Each of them offers their own interpretation of the nation. So sit back, make sure your stomach is settled, and enjoy the best multi-POV you've simmed since last year's urban brawl championship.
- Slamm-0!

RED

I want to say this at the outset: I am not proud of what I am.

- Oh, god, here we go …
- Slamm-0!

The biological needs of the Infected are something you can get used to, and I do my damnedest to never take it for granted. That's where the instincts start to take over, and you begin to slip away. When casually consuming people becomes second nature, you've crossed a line. It gets harder to ignore the hunger, or separate the nature of the sapient from the sanguine. I drink with pragmatism, gratitude, and shame, because it would be far too easy to keep a room full of bad people chained up and waiting to get eaten. At that point, I have no doubt I would truly be a monster.

By this metric, Asamando is a land of monsters.

I've only visited it once, for a single night. I was seized by a mixture of fear and curiosity. The "homeland" of the Infected holds some dread fascination for most of us, I imagine. I'd heard about

its enlightened policies, the way a whole city had been built around the ideals and practicalities of the new people of the Sixth World. Not just the infected, but free spirits, shapeshifters, maybe more. A city built to integrate magic and technology like no other before it.

Plus, the pay was good.

The dread was still there, though. Asamando, if nowhere else, would lay bare the horror of what I am, because there, it would not be treated with shame.

TRAVELER JONES

Sunshine needed news, so he sent me to Dez. Dez was in Asamando, so I needed Hannibelle. Hannibelle was busy, so she got me Red. I never met the guy, and vampires give me the heebies. But I needed an Infected to vouch for me if I was going to Ghoultown, and Belle has never let me down before, so hey, let's do this, right?

- See? To the point. We should all post like Jones does.
- Slamm-0!

RED

The plane arrived midday, but I never felt the sun. Nyamkopon International Airport is a masterpiece of the modern, amenities and comfortable spaces available to make the normal metahuman population of corporate suits who pass through as at home as possible. Nice hotels, kiosks with tourist kitsch, even a Seattle's Choice shop. I doubt they even notice the little conveniences that make it so accessible to the Infected: tunnels connecting every building, the holographic overlays that only simulate the outdoors in flawless detail instead of windows, the absence of allergens like real wood or wolfsbane or silver. Every taxi came into an indoor garage, and mine ferried us to the city in a darkened interior. The driver, a South African immigrant named Bokamoso, offered to play guide for a few nuyen. TJ gave the okay, so he left the cab and led us on.

It was striking how clean the city is. My trips to African nations have usually had a stark contrast between the sterile, luxurious corporate enclaves and the dusty, decaying places the real people are stuck with. Here, structures were sound, grounds were well tended, every public amenity and service in perfect working order. But it still had a sense of being lived in. Instead of corporate propaganda and subliminals, the colors and culture were plain to see. And that culture is much more diverse than I expected. Asamando has a modest population, maybe half a million official citizens, and a surprising number of them are immigrant Infected from all over the world, each bringing their own cultural elements to add to the unique flavor of the place. Native West African artistic expression and installments are in the lead, but not by much, as local art projects, bands, collectives and more introduce elements as disparate as Creole jazz, Bug Town blues, Horizon Afrikaans Tengeneza Upya architecture (purely for aesthetics—the country is wealthy enough that applied recycling isn't a matter of practicality), Yomi Island song trees, Parisian ARt, Neo-Tokyo perfumes (the precision and subtlety is appreciated in a country of meat-eaters with an enhanced sense of smell), London fashion, and much more. More impressive were the ways in which these influences melded and inspired new schools of expression. There aren't a lot of places where such a diverse population could get along so harmoniously. I guess a nation of pariahs and expatriates with the same sickness overcomes a lot of prejudices. Asamando is definitely a place to keep an eye on for new cultural expression.

- Don't think the corps aren't doing just that, albeit cautiously. The Queen doesn't appreciate her stars getting snatched up by outsiders, and more than a few corps are in court right now for copyright infringement. Remember, everything in Asamando technically belongs to the Queen, and she's got the bucks to pay for literal bloodsucking lawyers.
- Kia

- Didn't stop Pariah Soul from hopping on a juicy Horizon contract.
- Doc Fangs

- Ah, but he's already out of it, and he kept the fifty percent signing bonus. Pariah played the Queen and Horizon, and now he's freelance and worth a cool few mil. Already spinning out of a Proteus aquacology penthouse, last I heard. Pretty slick for a guy who eats dead people.
- Kat o' NineTales

- His themes about cannibalism and isolation had people thinking he was JetBlack for a minute, but anyone who has heard his EDM sound knows he's his own creature.
- Red

- JetBlack. Is. Dead. What is wrong with you fanboys?
- Clockwork

TRAVELER JONES

The first thing you notice is that Nyamkopon International is very empty. It's a big hub for transfers, and they do a lot of import/export work, seeing as the surrounding Black Volta tribes keep the borders pretty frosty, but no one is hanging around. The hotels are barely used and make most of their income through government subsidy to maintain the clean, modern façade of the nation. The rest is from long-term corpers who want to stay far from the Infected, close to the largest population of metahumans, and be able to beat a hasty retreat when things go wrong in this country. Which they will. Soon.

A kind of subculture of satellite sararimen exists here, suits from DeBeers Omnitech, S-K, and other corporations with a vested interest in the area (and more importantly, its vast mineral rights). Sure, corporate offices are leased in downtown Nyamkopon, but most of the guys prefer to telecommute from the airport. The DeBeers guy I chatted up in the bar (his attire was so casual that he might have been in his den watching the game) said he had only set foot in the local HQ once to meet his supervisor, and he's been here for eight years.

During the ride in, our cab was cramped as a coffin. Sure, AR displays simulate windows, and the AC kept out the dry heat, but you might still get motion sickness from the disconnect from actual movement. The view was informative, though: large sections of Asamando's "sprawl" are dedicated to agriculture, either in the open from irrigation off the Black Volta, or in small biodomes to cultivate more specialized crops. Plenty of the land is also kept for grazing. Red explained that many Infected breeds don't subsist entirely on metahuman flesh, so cattle supplement their diet. Obviously they don't export, since no one wants to buy food from a nation whose primary population is identified with the word "infected."

RED

We had some time to kill before the meet with TJ's contact, so Bokamoso gave us a tour of the town. Nyamkopon isn't exactly a big city, and local regulations keep any of the buildings from climbing taller than the palace. Years back, the population was around half a million, but then

"Why couldn't you just do your job from home, wherever that is?"

"I'm from Hamburg."

<Pauses to drink beer. Grimaces at the taste>

"The contracts state that we have to have a certain headcount within the borders to do business with national interests. Something about a show of sincerity. But the corporation knows the city is a high-stress environment, so they don't mind if we stick around here."

"High stress environment?"

<Looks at me over his mug, frowns>

"You do know what these things eat, right?"

the country had a boom—both from the Queen encouraging more "Children of Asamando," resulting in higher ghoul pregnancy rates, and the influx of Infected over the years (to say nothing of their longevity preventing a segment of the population from expiring from age). The population swelled to around 700,000, with the majority making their homes in Nyamkopon or the nearby mining town of Abo-denbo. Asamando has spent the past few years on something of a propaganda kick, working hard to establish a combination of credit with both the Infected and metahumanity. For the Infected, Asamando promises equality, a life without shame, secrecy, or persecution.

And that means a whole lot more lately. Across the world, recent changes in Infected populations (the most brutal is the sudden sharpening of our hunger), combined with the personal horror of the infamous Mealtime Killer and the more political Fear the Dark, have undone years of progress and reduced the hard-won mantle of "beleaguered fellow metahuman" back to "monster under the bed." Despite the efforts of the Ghoul Liberation League and some few sympathetic political parties, the rights of the Infected are at an all-time low, with many nations once again offering bounties. Megacorporate promises of shelter have died off as they fail to lure any Infected into laboratories even as anti-Infected hospitality protests damage public image. Aside from Aztlan and some few other places across the globe, Asamando is the only place which offers the Infected equality.

A place where you are welcome and can prosper. A place where you don't need to hide what you are. Where your instincts are not shunned. Bokamoso presented himself as a cynical, worldwise teen, but he clearly held some honest mea-

sure of pride and patriotism for his adopted home.

He led us along one of the shadeways, the plentiful pedestrian walkways that invariably offer as much shelter from the harsh sunlight as possible. He pointed out that wealthier homes and businesses can afford specifically warded, dual-natured glass windows that block not only the ultraviolet light that we so dislike, but also the mystical components that pierce most mundane means or protection as well, providing them with the aesthetic of light without any of its debilitating effects. I asked after the price (what vampire wouldn't?), and he just laughed and shook his head.

Along the sides of the road are the tunnels, presenting a real-time view of the outdoors by way of LCD screens, holograms, or AR. Another sidewalk is closer to the street, still shaded by overhangs. Many of the streets have arches of UV-resistant plexiglass, so that the infrequent storms rarely affect the city roads. Our present tunnel (lined with small shop kiosks) ran along the outer track of a street leading downtown to a popular pre-dawn club. "The influential begin their revels early. They can afford to."

Closer to the city core, construction could be heard below our feet. Bokamoso grinned. "The Queen's law says there may be no buildings taller than the palace. But Nyamkopon is a growing city, and the sun is the enemy. So, we build down."

TJ

I wouldn't say that Nyamkopon is a ghost town by day. That would be too on the nose. It's more like the beginning of *Dawn of the Dead*: Grey-skinned flesh-eaters creep in the shadows, going through the motions of a more mundane life left behind. The ghoul equivalent of metahuman night-owls working the redeye shift. Most businesses are closed down, and the unsheltered streets—what few there are—have barely a soul walking them. Some few ghouls with heavy clothes dart between buildings, while the rare free metahuman resident seems to revel in the sunlight. There's a passive sense of paranoia about them, jumpy. Only in the daylight do they relax. You can see them counting the minutes.

While there's no official district or neighborhood for the uninfected, and most of them seem to congregate at the airport, there are a few businesses that try to cater to them. They have that kind of cartoonish appeal you see in the UCAS endcap of a Japanese market, the one that sells SucroZoom and AlmostEgg with plastboard cowboy hats and flags. The twist is that the context is specifically for foreigners—they've got lots of smiling cartoon suns. Too many. Gives you a little insight into how the Infected think of their past lives, assuming they ever had one.

- Sometimes I wonder if it would have been easier to have been born a ghoul instead of Infected later in life. All things considered, for a ghoul, I'm lucky; the same memories that haunt me are also a source of reassurance and strength. Still, it might have been easier to have been born this way. Naturally born ghouls are much more likely to retain their sanity, provided they don't learn to be feral from feral parents.
- Hannibelle

- Asamando has a kind of foster program for ghoul children of ferals to make sure they get a good education and every chance to put their mind to its best use. A lot of the ones who have grown up have taken up careers as sociologists and doctors, seeking new ways to ease the burdens of their parents, perhaps be the one to find a way to bring a feral infected back to sapience or design artificial flesh substitutes.
- Red

RED

The sunset was heralded by a soft chime. Little monitors by every door with LCD displays that use dual-natured filler communicate UV index, time to sundown and sunup, and general weather so that even a blind ghoul can see. Muted lights came up, and the gentle glow brought the sparse tunnels to life. Bokamoso opened one of the doors, and we were treated to our first unsheltered sight of the city.

Early risers were making their way to work, cars humming efficiently along the new GridGuide system, UV-free lights bringing the city to life. For the first time in my life, I saw ghouls standing tall, wearing clean clothes and chatting casually in the open. Setting aside their appearance, you'd never know there was anything different about them, or the city.

From the main street stretch we could see the Palace, rising tall on a hill that looked down on the city, entire. The bone-white spires at each of the four corners played host to the Asamando colors on crisp banners snapping in the warm evening breeze. At the center, a broad dome, emerald-green outside and supposedly gilt within using gold dug from the first excavations of the city. The

proudest examples of Asamando's extensive agricultural programs show in the garden road leading up to the palace after a bridge over one of the largest canals of Black Volta water, though it is stunning how much of the city plays host to greenery. The foliage is said to have a very pleasing feeling for the spirits who call the city home, and for the dual-natured Infected, it serves to add yet more shade and to help equalize a manasphere that is buzzing uncomfortably under the surface.

- You couldn't pay me to astrally project over there.
- Ethernaut

- Afraid?
- Winterhawk

- There's a background count brought on by the suffering of thousands, free spirits are all over, at least thirty percent of the population are some kind of mage, and most citizens are dual-natured and don't like strangers? Damn right, I'm afraid.
- Ethernaut

- Good. If you're afraid, you're smart.
- Winterhawk

We crossed the pedestrian overpass into the squat downtown core of the city, then rode escalators up into one of the tallest buildings. At a mere six stories high, this isn't saying much, but the view is impressive all the same. The DeBeers-Omni Building is sleek and modern, made of a light-absorbing blackstone that reduces its glare during the day. Bokamoso laughed. "They think reducing the light pollution will show they understand us. As though we care when we're indoors, anyway?" This degree of overcompensation for the comfort of the Infected continues indoors, where the décor is set up to appeal to native tastes while embracing the multicultural flair of the city ... by primarily showcasing DeBeers corporate culture. Materials are never real wood, temperatures are cool even by the normal air-conditioned standards, and the scents of humanity and Infected are utterly obliterated by neutralizing perfumes on the living staff and aromatherapeutic air filters. Strangely, the showpieces of the main floor are a combination of hydroponic floral sculptures juxtaposed by sterile displays of mineral extractions from the national mines. I imagine the contrast is meant to appeal to the kinds of spirits employed by the miners. Bokamoso had no idea, and TJ had no opinion. Not that he'd voiced much of one about anything on the trip.

Our guide left us there, saying where we were going was too rich for the likes of him. I asked where his patriotic spirit of kinsmanship with his fellow Infected had gone. He laughed at me and looked at TJ. "Likes to hear himself talk, that one." He turned and took off his cap in salutation as he walked away.

- BAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!
- Slamm-0!

- Why do I keep hanging out with you?
- Red

- You can't afford to be picky. You drink blood.
- Slamm-0!

- You smell like a gym locker full of stale cheez puffs.
- Red

- So help me, the ban hammer is just waiting ...
- Bull

- ... you could shower more, honey.
- Netcat

- Wha-?!
- Slamm-0!

TJ

Hanging out in a club made for cannibals isn't exactly an experience I'd like to repeat. I remember a restaurant in the Philippines, years ago, that served placenta in a traditional style. It made me queasy. Here ... well, I might go vegan after this. Now I know how the lobster in the tank feels.

There was an upside, though: A place like this brings out the corporate sharks who want to wheel and deal with the locals, and for once, they look scared. They play it cool, as always, but you can see the ghouls and the odd vampire are clearly aware they have the upper hand. I couldn't help but remember this face I worked with back when I was first getting started. The guy never let them see any fear. I asked how he kept calm when he faced others. He just grinned and said, "Black belts in three martial arts. Nothing cures fear like knowing you can snap the other guy's neck." That's how every Infected power player must feel here. Suits

Szandor: —course I know who you are.

Red: You do?

Szandor: Naturally! Crimson made quite the little literary splash around here, not so many years ago. Don't imagine you saw any of the proceeds, of course. Very underground press. Can't wait for your next one, though. Such a refreshing change from the usual DeVries pulp nonsense.

Red: Ah … of course.

Szandor: You must let me take you to the vineyards.

Red: Are you in the agricultural business? I didn't know Asamando produced any grapes.

<Laughter>

Szandor: Oh! I beg your pardon. You're quite used to thinking in metahumans terms, aren't you? No, my friend, no. Here. Try this.

Red: No, thank you, really, I—

Szandor: I insist.

Red: That's … an extraordinary flavor.

Szandor: I should imagine so. So very piquant. It's due to the very humane procedures we exercise with our cattle.

Red: This tastes human.

Szandor: Of course it does.

Red: You've managed to engineer human blood from animals? I've tasted facsimiles, but it never—

Szandor: No, my friend. I don't deal in genetically tampered products. We pick all our metahuman cattle from the finest stock. They are positively pampered. Massaged, well-fed, entertained. And bred the natural way, breeding new flavors we will enjoy for years to come. In select vintages, of course. Can't keep the flavor forever. Well, maybe some of the elves —

Red: I'm sorry, did you say breed?

Szandor: Of course. Why leave perfectly good stock to age? Generation by generation, we perfect the nectars. You really can taste the joy in them, can't you? I applied the same techniques the Japanese do with their Kobe beef. Perhaps ghouls are happy with their butchery wholesale, but we have more refined palettes, no?

Red: That's … isn't that slavery?

Szandor: I assure you, they are enjoying their lives far more than your scavengers in Chicago or wageslaves in Seattle. Why, I personally tapped the nectar you just tasted only three hours ago. Healthiest, happiest little child you can imagine.

Red: Excuse me?

Szandor: I know, I know. Volume is vital, but I can't help the occasional nip of five-year. I'm sure you can taste why.

look at you like they're deciding how to sell you. Infected? They eye you like a Christmas roast.

The place was the image of a vampire club from the trids. No real wood. Lots of red and black, real leather upholstery, and muted lights. Awfully European for a West African nation, but that might be to appeal to the power players from up north. But I gotta give credit for the place catering to the Awakened: The air system used conflicting temperatures to create a kind of subtle thermal light show for people with thermographic vision.

The bar, though ...

They had a decent, if sparse, collection of top-shelf liquor and great imported beer. I overheard Red talking to some guy about a wine cellar. And thankfully they weren't serving hor d'oeuvres. But vampires don't like booze, and as it turns out, even ghouls enjoy liquid lunch. Slurries and slushies, wine bottles pouring too-thick red. I've seen some really screwed up things, but the pink of metahuman flesh going into a blender...

The smell. There was perfume, and the air filters are top of the line, but the blenders made this smell when they were making a powdered bone garnish. I didn't get why it smelled so familiar until later. It was the same smell you get when a dentist drills your teeth.

- I feel sick. You really gotta go into detail?
- Bull

- You wanted the gory truth.
- Traveler Jones

- I didn't mean literally ...
- Bull

RED

I found many of the dark glitterati of Asamando exceptionally personable. More than a few introduced themselves with a hearty handshake and a toothy smile. Accents and customs intermingled in a mélange of heady scents from the bar as I met industrialists, investors, developers, ambassadors, and more. I made my best effort to introduce TJ, but after he coughed and turned away from the first proffered hand, I figured it was best to do the talking.

TJ

Red ran for the washroom when I spotted Dez, though it took me a second to recognize him without a face full of dust and a keffiyeh around

his neck. Good lookin' kid, either way. Don't know why anyone that handsome wants to make a living doing exposes on war zones, but hey, I could be blamed for the same.

- You leathery little charmer.
- Kat o' Nine Tales

- The word you're looking for is "rugged."
- Traveler Jones

- Seriously, though: That Dez is a looker.
- Turbo Bunny

- I've gotten some decent stories out of him. He could make a great living for one of the major newsnets, but he's got a big crusader streak in him. I genuinely hope it doesn't get him killed.
- Sunshine

So the kid plays like we're old friends, uses the code names we agreed on ahead of time, and he pulls me over to a booth. I slip out a white noise generator, but he stops my hand. Guess he knew something I didn't.

- Some infected have sensitive enough hearing to tell when the generator goes on. We can't hear through it, but we can tell you're hiding.
- EB

- And now I know.
- Traveler Jones

Now, as any of you who have worked with me know, I'm no slouch at smuggling. That means being a natural-born liar. But I don't know Dez well enough to say the same of him. He launches into a quiet little story about a shipment being held up while he sets an optical chip down on the booth seat between us. I palm it, telling him the goods were held up in Memphis, and that it'll take a little more time. He put on a good act, grumbling but accepting the excuse, and leaving in a hurry.

- Looks like he made it out in one piece, too. I got word he is in Cairo now, on his way to another story. Maybe he can come in later and offer some details.
- Sunshine

- Wait, why even bother smuggling this stuff out if he was getting out, anyway?
- Whippet

- Because he didn't know he would make it out. Sometimes the data is too important to risk it. Or maybe he was being followed, and his exit depended on not handling the stuff himself.
- Sunshine

RED

I ran for the washroom. Some Infected need to go from time to time, depending on the breed, diet, and circumstances. I just needed somewhere to throw up.

I could feel the blood of a child in me, and it tasted far too good. Hints of innocence and untapped potential swam like afternotes, and I shuddered at the intellectual revulsion of my reflexive pleasure. The washroom doors opened. The toilet was immaculate.

I couldn't vomit.

My body had already absorbed the blood.

I could feel it in my arms, the base of my spine, my temples, throbbing soothingly. It felt hot, flushing inside me, diluting and mingling until that boy was suffused throughout my entire being. I stared into the mirror over the running water of the sink and watched the crimson withdraw from my eyes, my canines sliding back into their normal position. What a handsome predator. What a pretty hypocrite.

- Are you okay, Rick?
- /dev/grrl

- Yeah. I have to be.
- Red

I walked back to the bar but saw a door leading to the kitchen. It didn't occur to me to look until I heard a weak moaning. I entered the room to find everything expected of a back bar: the CO2 canisters and dispensers for sodas, the kegs and rows of spare bottles. But the moaning, that was from the three humans bound to chairs with padded cuffs, long IV tubing trailing from nutrient pouches, others leading back toward the bar. Two were completely entranced, but the third blinked sleepily at me, moaning in confusion and fear.

TJ

I was just slipping the optical chip into a flesh pouch and debating trying to enjoy a beer when Red comes over to the table. He holds out his commlink

and says, "Pay me the rest." Not very professional. "The job's almost done," I say. He just holds out his link and whispers, "I gotta buy a couple things. Then we get out of here together. Now."

I shrug. Everybody gets one, right? I transfer over the cred, and he goes over to the bar. The tender shrugs and nods and goes in back, then comes out with a staggering human who looks like he's been crash dieting for three weeks. I mean really ... drained. Yep. On the nose.

As a smuggler, it's my job to stay under the radar, avoid notice. And here's Red, holding a strung-out guy and looking for the exit. Not exactly subtle. But the better part of stealth is taking advantage of a distraction, and damn if the kid doesn't know how to drum up a diversion. We were out of there in three minutes. Red didn't stop at the hotel to grab our overnights. Just got a cab and direct to the airport. Two hours later we're on our way to Morocco.

We took the roundabout way, stopped over in London for a hot minute, where he dropped the guy with some friends. Didn't talk about it. Didn't talk about much for the rest of the trip, truth be told.

But we got the data from Dez. In, out. Job's done. You owe me, Sunshine.

- Nice work. You saved one. Whole paycheck to buy some half-dead ghoul chow. Real smart.
- Clockwork

- Sometimes you can save one. Sometimes it's enough to save yourself.
- Hard Exit

BLOOD DIAMONDS

POSTED BY: DEZ

The nation of Asamando. The jeweled leper colony of West Africa. Greatest concentration of HM-HVV infected—

- **LINK: FULL ARTICLE**

- Sorry, but as good at this as Dez is, we don't need to hear the preamble all over again. If you want to see it all, check out the link above for archives, but it's just for mood and setting. I'll skip to the actual paydata for now.
- Gitch

THE RECENT TROUBLES

The country has seen its share of complications in recent times. On November 8, 2075, Asamando had a chance to finally achieve its long-held ambition of recognition by the United Nations. While the UN had been dispatching investigations into the country to see if the primarily infected population had made any significant advances in their humanitarian efforts (which is to say, had developed a synthetic substitute for metahuman flesh), none had considered the progress sufficient to see the nation as anything more than a wealthy leper colony. Unfortunately for Asamando, the inspectors had been collating data comparing the import population of extra-national prisoners and the enormous sizes of Asamando's "prisons" (locally known as "storehouses"). An inspection team decided to make an unannounced inspection, and what they found would have lasting repercussions.

Asamando was long known for buying the dead from other countries. Whether by using Tamanous or more legal means, Queen Laula did her best to emphasize the nature of ghouls as natural scavengers rather than predators (the charismatic stateswoman impressively managed this without sacrificing the pride of her people). Perhaps it was optimism, ignorance, or intentional deception on the part of Asamando, but when the pieces finally fell into place, the inspectors discovered the enormous, and more importantly living, population of the massive prison complexes. Inspired by the presence of the inspectors, the prisoners rioted, and the prison wardens decided to release the thousands of feral ghouls kept isolated in other branches of the storehouses. The prisoners were contained, the inspectors slaughtered, and the cover-up failed.

The fallout of this debacle would prove even more devastating. The stress proved too much for the founding Queen, and Thema Laula died of a massive heart attack, leaving her daughter Rani to ascend to the throne. To the outsider, her consumption of her mother's heart to symbolically gain her strength might be considered ironic, but the native population took to it in a powerful way. Their loyalty was assured, and Queen Rani's reign has run all but unopposed in the years since.

- "All but" leaves some room ...
- Old Crow

- Most of the native population falls in line with Rani's edicts, particularly the ghouls, but some immigrants, particularly the ones who have been persecuted in the past and enjoy the freedom of Asamando, tend to see her in a less-positive light.
- Hannibelle

- You'd think they'd be super-patriotic or out for revenge against metas for previous treatment.
- /dev/grrl

- I disagree. Victims of tyranny know what a tyrant in the making looks like. They know that even the ones who profit by it become chained by it.
- Old Crow

- That, and they know that being seen as a monster and not as a victim—and being all gathered together in one easy-to-nuke place—isn't doing their odds any favors.
- Doc Spin

Still, some note that she keeps very different counsel than her mother. Much of Queen Thema's cabinet has retired, left the country, or met with suspicious "accidents."

Friedrich Steiner, a vampire out of Austria. Steiner had been meeting with Rani for about a year before she took the throne, with some speculating that he had been brought in by the queen to teach her restraint and international diplomacy. Steiner is a minor noble in his homeland, investing his wealth into a labyrinthine old-boy network that sees steady returns.

- Can someone say Ordo Maximus?
- Plan 9

- Got any proof whatsoever? Or is it just the voices in your head?
- Snopes

- It reads like a Darien Cross novel, so ... maybe he (she?) is right.
- /dev/grrl

- She, but only until next week.
- Plan 9

General Akambe Okonjo. Once a decorated officer from the Asante Nation, the general was infected with Krieger Strain HMHVV. According to rumors, it was during testing to see if feral ghouls

could be harnessed as shock troops. After it became clear he was changing, he made his way to Asamando. While Queen Laula found him deplorable personally, his skills as a soldier provided for a rapid advance up the ranks of the Asamando Defense Forces. It was quite a surprise when Queen Rani appointed him to chief military advisor, given his seeming disdain for feral infected, but so far he has managed to keep the borders secure. I suspect that the slaughter of UN officials was on his orders.

- This guy is a real piece of work. Most of his career has been pacifying food riots. Before he was a ghoul, he was bloodthirsty enough. Now he gives troops under his direct command "feeding rights" for their kills. They are exceptionally loyal, as a result, but he's provoking his enemies beyond all reason.
- Hannibelle

Dr. Viktoria Ermaline, nosferatu. An early collaborator with Bruckner and Langer during their early work studying HMHVV, Dr Ermaline's inherent paranoia led her to leave their team and strike out on her own. She vanished from public view until just last year, when she turned up doing research in Asamando.

A PROMISED LAND

Asamando has seen a boost in population after the aggressive media campaign instituted by the now-deceased Queen Thema Laula, largely (and effectively) carried out through a very expensive contract with Horizon. Globally, ads appear that seek to influence both the Infected and normal metahumans, subtly suggesting there is not only a place where a ghoul or vampire might feel at home, but isolating them as well. "Why don't you go where you belong?" has become a slogan for those who feel some sympathy for ghouls, but not enough to welcome them into their homes or even cities. Asamando is relief to all, in this way, a refuge for the damned, a convenient corner to shuttle them off to. Out of sight, out of mind, conscience assuaged.

Some have gone so far as to think that Asamando is a merciful way to not only contain but end infection. Perhaps based on the mistaken belief that ghouls are sterile because they are undead, some forget that a pack need not spread their disease to increase their numbers. Citizen action groups sometimes attempt to sway public policy regarding Infected toward active deportation, entertaining dreams of enforcing UN sanctions to isolate and effectively quarantine the nation. Some Humanis cells promote these campaigns to show their "merciful" side. Most cities and nations have much greater concerns, however, and Asamando remains little more than a pet project or buzzword for some lower-level politicians.

Still, Asamando's population has doubled in just six years, as Infected of all strains and types flock to the young nation to stake their claim and find some measure of safety in the wake of popular opinion turning against them.

THE PORT IN THE STORM

Across the world, the Infected are currently seen with more suspicion, fear, and hate than any other period of Sixth World history. In the past, views of the Infected ranged from caution at best to terror at worst, but there were also vast efforts to win them some measure of understanding and rights. For a brief moment, the struggles of noted humanitarian Tamir Grey, as well as the ongoing campaigns by the Ghoul Liberation League and associated organizations, bought ghouls the basic rights of any other metahuman through the Illinois legislation of Order 162 in 2053. This milestone achievement was short-lived, however. It was rescinded the next year, and the ghouls of the Cabrini Refuge in Chicago were abandoned.

- Isn't calling Tamir Grey a "humanitarian" a bad joke?
- Slamm-0!

- Why would you—Oh. Fuck you. You have no idea what it's like.
- Hanibelle

- Tamir was a saint. To his credit, he probably would have laughed a little at that.
- Red

In spite of this, Infected made remarkable strides in the following decades. While gangs of bitter ghouls formed the 162s, the GLL continued its mission of seeking legal promotion of infected awareness and rights. This saw limited success in the UCAS, with probationary or effectively criminal SINs given on a special case basis, and even then only to those infected who obeyed exceptionally stringent, constantly scrutinized lives.

- What was the name of that vampire who ran the Orlock in Seattle?
- Bull

- I can't believe you ever went there. I think his name was something really silly. Jericho Cain or some other gothy thing. Wasn't his real name, and he wasn't a real vampire. No vampire would have been caught dead there.
- Red

- Don't you mean ... undead?
- Slamm-0!

- (RUN SFX: CRICKETS)
- Hannibelle

- The Castle in Manhattan, on the other hand ... I don't remember the owner's name, but he was one of the probationary SINers. I heard it was a trial run based on Germany's laws regarding provisional infected citizenship: volunteers for feeding only, no coercion, etc. Had a tracker on at all times, too, as I remember. No idea what happened to him, but today there's a Szechuan restaurant where the Castle once stood.
- Red

The past few years, however, have seen a number of events that have set back the cause of Infected rights by years, with the path to recovery uncertain or even impossible. From the campaign of terror initiated by Fear the Dark terrorists to the Mealtime Killer and the international rise of copycats, metahumans the world over have come to see the Infected less as a boogeyman who will haunt someone else and more as the danger lurking around every corner.

- No kidding. Salish-Shidhe is strongly considering enforcing a temporary probation on Infected citizens, at least in the short term. Public outcry has made it very difficult to do any less, even with prominent shamans speaking on their behalf.
- Kay St. Irregular

- What could they possibly say in their defense?
- Clockwork

- Even nightmares have their place, particularly when they have a human soul.
- Man-of-Many-Names

- Yeah, stuff like that.
- Kay St. Irregular

- It's actually pretty impressive how tolerant they have been, considering the metaphysical ramifications of Infected hunger and the beliefs of many Native American tribal faiths.
- Lyran

This has served to make the offer of citizenship in Asamando all the more attractive for persecuted Infected, and the country has swollen as a result. A half-million immigrants have arrived, with up to a hundred more entering every week. This doubling of the permanent population has led to vast urban expansion projects. Despite the impressive agricultural projects of Asamando (almost entirely to feed their captive foodstock population), Nyamkopon has been the destination of most new arrivals, with perhaps twenty percent settling instead in the industrial town of Abo-denbo.

Housing this bursting population may seem beguiling to those who remain above ground, because the city is, indeed expanding. Downward. Asamando has seen a tremendous escalation of construction projects, which have been excavating deeper and deeper into the land below Nyamkopon and Abo-denbo.

- How is the city not caving in on all these new projects?
- Lyran

- Remember that law about no civilian building being taller than the palace? That means the tallest building is the SK local HQ, a mighty ten stories. And we're talking about a city that was built in the '30s. Technically, that makes it one of the most modern cities in the world. They didn't build on the outdated sewers and mined out caverns of other, older metropolises. They used advanced material and architectural techniques from the start, and going back and fixing things isn't as hard as a result. They can shore up such a relatively light city pretty easily.
- Beaker

- Plus, this is a country that drives its (very powerful) economy on mining. You think they don't know how to dig down the safe way, and with the best tools to do it?
- Mr. Bonds

- I'll do you one better: Asamando is a very, very spirit-friendly nation. More than a few free spirits have citizenship there, and lesser spirits have been known to just drop in. A lot of their summoners maintain exceedingly good relationships with spirits, effectively paying them for their labor. You want to build

downward? I bet some powerful, friendly earth spirits will do the trick pretty damn well.
- Ethernaut

- Couldn't they double down on their mining? Like, just fill in all those mines with facilities and whatnot?
- /dev/grrl

- It doesn't quite work that way. They can keep what they find while excavating, of course. It's all gotta go somewhere, right? But you have to build in particular patterns to maintain structural integrity, and sometimes that means abandoning a good find. Unless, of course, they've got earth spirits just pulling the good stuff out and spitting it on the ground without disturbing the … oh, wow. No wonder they're rich.
- Beaker

Of course, that much modern expansion comes at a cost. Fortunately for the Queen, she owns a diamond mine or five. Literally. Asamando has doubled down on its mineral extraction of late. The mounting pressures of population expansion and the looming sense of military and logistical needs have Queen Rani importing massive shipments of supplies.

- "Logistical needs" is an interesting way of saying, "people to eat."
- Butch

- Getting around trade embargoes has smugglers doing work for Asamando, which is a pretty funny reversal from the norm. Tamanous and other large-scale movers are making money hand over fist, bringing in building and tech supplies that aren't as in-demand anywhere else. And the local corps who do regular business are more than happy to bypass embargoes with false consignment logs and paperwork. The UN is still pushing to get better inspections, but so far DeBeers and the others have stayed one step ahead. If the UN ever breaks through the bullshit, there will be hell to pay with the Corporate Court.
- Kia

- It goes deeper than that. There's been a rash of "random" infections across the world, different megacorps and nations—always technical specialists, scientists, high-value targets. I've read some of the security reports that suspect they are being quietly infected by Fear the Dark terrorists. Takeshi Mizua from Yakashima, Alexis Franzmeier from BioGene, Yoshi Izumi from Renraku, etc. The most common tactic is tainting their food with Strain II or III. The real suspicious part? They usually get extracted right after … and then show up in Asamando.
- Red Anya

- Tainting their food?! Fuck me. They get someone in a food-packaging plant, there could be an epidemic!
- Bull

- Believe me, you're not the first to see it. Aztechnology may be Infection-friendly, but they've been doubling down on security and quality inspection.
- Pyramid Watcher

- Izumi is one of the original architects of the Arcology in Seattle.
- Renraku Fox

- Great. Another arcology, but this one's underground, nuke-proof, and full of flesh-eating monsters instead of AI monsters.
- Bull

- Mizua was one of the project leads looking for an artificial flesh substitute for ghouls. He took his own life when he got Infected. Guess he wasn't optimistic on its success.
- Baka Dabora

- Man, Asamando takes headhunting to a whole new level.
- Slamm-0

- Am I the only one seeing the cooperation between Fear the Dark and Asamando?
- Plan 9

- Whenever you start a sentence "Am I the only one …," you can pretty much automatically fill in the "yes."
- Snopes

NO MAN'S LAND

The borders of Asamando are, for lack of a better term, a demilitarized zone. Stretches of desolate land surrounding the country have been traditionally patrolled by the tribal militias of neighboring lands. While they are equipped to deal with all manner of poachers and bandits, they have also developed techniques and equipment specifically against Infected raiders from Asamando.

In the early days of the nation, Queen Laula attempted to make trading pacts with the neighboring tribal councils for their dead, offering the labor and resources of Asamando. The alliance was short-lived, as ghoul hunting parties would strike out for "fresh game." Had these early conflicts not arisen, it is likely Asamando would see far more prosperity today, with coastal access and easier supplies of food stock.

The borders now host a number of outposts on either side against overzealous expeditions, though Asamando also guards tightly against smuggling. Getting prohibited or government-owned property (re: any unlicensed resources, such as diamonds) in or out of the country is notoriously difficult, and draconian consequences are infamous among smuggler circles.

- No shit. I knew a guy who tried making a run for some diamonds. When they caught him, the guards made a joke about "what happens when your hand gets caught in the cookie jar." The replacement hand wasn't too expensive, but he's gone vegan ever since watching them eat it in front of him. Damn shame. He was a regular grill master.
- 2XL

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

Perhaps the most disturbing development in Asamando concerns its food supply. In the past, the nation has purchased the dead and, more horrifically, the prisoners and slave stock of other nations to supply the needs of its people. For the past few years since the UN embargo, however, they have found their usual means of supply stymied significantly. Entire pirate slaver clans and human trafficking rings have begun to devote the majority of their business to keeping Asamando stocked, while Tamanous blows the doors off shipping every last scrap to the country's larders.

The problem is that it is not enough.

For around five years, there have been reports among the Infected that their hunger pangs have increased. Not their need for flesh so much as the sharpness of appetite. Many say that unless they stay ahead of the craving, it can overtake and overcome their willpower, rendering them mindless killing machines until the hunger is sated. While this presents enough difficulty as is, the UN fiasco has made it harder to meet the needs of the populace. Consider the waves of new immigrants, and you begin to grasp how dire the situation is.

- The population didn't appear to hold any grudges against newcomers. Horizon seems to have directed the anger toward metahumanity instead of competition for sustenance.
- Red

- Horizon doesn't seem to be making any effort to mollify hostility, but instead to channel it. It's more effective, especially when you can make a scapegoat of something you already want to kill, but it's also bad long-term planning if Asamando wants to survive as part of the world.
- Dr. Spin

The food supplies are already diminishing, not that you can tell from the streets. The wealthy and influential treat flesh and blood as disposably as any corporate in the world, while the common citizen ghoul is noticing the rising price for their pound of flesh. The poor, however, are now feeling the hunger more acutely, and ferals sometimes take to attacking one another to feed.

- Given what we know about the instigators of viral mutation for infected who feed on one another, it's entirely possible those ghouls are developing in strange, dangerous new ways ...
- Doc Fangs

FEEDING THE DISEASE

The scarcity of food will only continue to worsen unless Asamando finds new ways to meet demand. Several projects are currently underway to do just that. Here's a rundown of some of them.

Harvesting Techniques: Asamando is working hard to refine their methods of human harvesting, keeping stock alive longer while using more of their bodies than before. While this research shows promise, it will only forestall the inevitable.

- If they use Tamanous techniques, they're probably putting people on life support in medically induced comas to have them produce as much as possible before expiring.
- Butch

Synthetic Substitute: The elusive artificial flesh for ghouls, long sought if only for the bequest in Dunkelzahn's will, remains just out of reach of science. Several advances by Yakishima and the Thema Laula Medical Center (TLMC) have resulted in close calls, but the final pieces of the puzzle never seem to pan out, as one clue leads to two new complications.

Clonal Donors: A common question among many people of the world is, "Why don't we just clone a lot of meat for ghouls?" The problem is the incredible cost involved. Clones are prohibitively expensive to produce, and the necessary facilities are difficult to maintain. While Asamando has been constructing such facilities, the number of clones needed, even with speed-growth techniques and

baked-in genetics that offer higher usable gross, are beyond the means of even Asamando's considerable wealth.

Breeding Programs: In perhaps its most horrific option, Asamando has begun to use its captive metahuman population to breed replacements. Fertility treatments can theoretically provide litters of children, while most of the byproducts of birth can also be used for food. While this is a long-term solution, until it shows results, the program is of little use.

- It also explains all that agricultural expansion. Like grazing lands for cattle.
- Icarus

- Word is that the Thema Laula Medical Center has gotten a serious upgrade to their cybernetics labs. Like the kind of stuff you only see in the hands of a few megacorps.
- Red Anya

- So Asamando has a delta lab? Who the hell would provide them with that?
- Bull

- The council has old-money Euro connections. Vampires. Genetic tests on HMHVV. Delta tech ... all we need are cyberzombies and it would be so obvious even Snopes couldn't argue.
- Plan 9

- I'm not ready to say it's a fact, but I can admit when evidence starts piling up. I'll get to work looking for hard evidence of Ordo Maximus involvement. How about you actually buckle down and do the same, and we'll compare notes? Maybe come up with more than rumors and theories?
- Snopes

- I've been looking forward to this team-up for a while now. This is exciting!
- Plan 10

For the moment, the government seems more interested in maintaining public order than preserving its food supply. The food riots of several years past cost Asamando resources and stability, two things it needs now more than ever. But the veneer of prosperity doesn't reach the farther villages, and ghoul packs, driven to desperation by their own hunger or fear of turning feral, have begun poaching in neighboring lands.

- Worse, there are reports that some of the raiding parties are rogue military elements from the security outposts. Either they are providing for their people, or selling off captives for money on the side.
- Am-Mut

Perhaps most terrifying are the incidental results from the synthetic substitute research. Scientists at the TLMC are attempting to alter animal DNA so that it can mimic the metaphysical patterns of metahumans. Theoretically, this would allow the Infected to consume the components of this altered livestock and receive nutrition equivalent to their chosen prey. While this may sound viable, their test methods mean that the animal in question could be infected. This is their current criteria: to break the zoonotic barrier for HMHVV.

- Holy shit. Ghoul rats? They're one missing lab rat away from an actual ghoul apocalypse.
- Beaker

- They could sterilize the rats, though, right?
- Sounder

- It wouldn't make a difference. If they can make HMHVV cross the species barrier, they'll be able to infect normal rats. If not at first, then later. The mutation ratio is just too high. You'll have rats that can breed true and spread, feeding on humans and their own kind. It would be like a modern Black Plague. VITAS would have nothing on this.
- Butch

- Given the recent discovery of infectivity in sapient non-metahuman hosts such as merrow and nagas, does this denote the inducement of sapience in the animals?
- Doc Fangs

- That hardly seems likely.
- KAM

- **USER: DEZ GRANTED ACCESS**

- Hey! I've got Dez online, safe and sound. Anything you want to add?
- Slamm-0

- I tried to maintain journalistic integrity by remaining as impartial as possible, but I saw things in Asamando that are worse than any vision of Hell I can imagine. I empathize with the suffering the Infected endure, but it cannot justify the bondage and slaughter of countless thousands of metahumans. Asamando is a disaster in the making,

whether it comes from within or without. The megas are sharpening their knives to carve up the resources just like they once did with the Native American reservations. The UN seems more motivated by vengeance than anything. And the country itself is headed toward isolation or implosion. And if Asamando falls, a million dispossessed Infected will flood across the world.

- Dez

- I hate that it is coming to this. For many infected, Asamando represents a dream. Seeing it driven to the brink … it robs many of us of what little hope we have left.
- Hannibelle

- Works fine for me. Put them all in one place and watch them eat each other. Sounds like an elegant solution. Of course, we could just save time with a few Thor shots.
- Clockwork

- That's the right attitude, Clock. Piss them off so they all go FtD. That'll go swimmingly.
- Red

- Now I'm picturing the 162s on a recruitment drive. Only with a lot of money and nothing to lose.
- Lyran

GAME INFORMATION

VARIEGATED INFECTED

Infected changes continue to occur, so rules must keep up with the changes! This section describes various Optional Powers and Advanced Optional Powers available to Infected characters. At least two Optional Powers must be purchased before any Advanced Optional Powers can be purchased (except for chirons, jabberwocky, lamias, and nibiinaabe, which have no Optional Powers). This represents the continued mutation of the body by HMHVV. Like Optional Powers, one Advanced Optional Power can be purchased every two in-game months. The available Powers listed here are in addition to the Powers listed in *Run Faster*.

BANDERSNATCH

- **Optional Powers:** Armor, Enhanced Senses (Smell, Hearing), Immunity (Pathogens, Toxins)
- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Evolved Reflexes, Pounce

BANSHEE

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Silence, Sonic Shriek

CHIRON

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Bacchanal, Dread Feast

DZOO-NOO-QUA

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Bone Spikes, Desire Reflection

FOMÓRAIG

- **Optional Powers:** Armor, Immunity (Pathogens, Toxins)
- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Amphibious, Calcified Hide

GHOUL

- **Optional Powers:** Armor, Immunity (Pathogens, Toxins)
- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Corrosive Spit, Tunneling Claws

GNAWER

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Gnashing Teeth, Rat King

GOBLIN

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Plague Bearer, Stupefying Miasma

GRENDEL

- **Optional Powers:** Enhanced Sense (Hearing), Immunity (Pathogens)
- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Darkness, Feral Dash

HARVESTER

- **Optional Powers:** Fear, Immunity (Pathogens, Toxins)
- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Immunity (Cold), Scythe Claws

JABBERWOCK

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Dual Concealment, Morningstar Fall

LAMIA

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Deathlock Venom, Metahuman Masque

LOUP-GAROU

- **Optional Powers:** Armor (+2 max), Immunity (Pathogens), Paralyzing Howl
- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Digitigrade Legs, Wall Walking

MUTAQUA

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Astral Brute, Predator's Glamour

NIBIINAABE

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Drag Down, Spines

NOSFERATU

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Mimicry, Mystic Armor, Psychokinesis

VAMPIRE

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Secretion/Substance Extrusion (Anti-Coagulant), Terrorscape

WENDIGO

- **Advanced Optional Powers:** Immunity (Cold), Traceless Walk

AMPHIBIOUS

Type: P **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always

The Infected has developed gills in addition to their lungs, allowing them to breathe equally well on land and underwater. The Infected's gills function in both salt and fresh water. Adapted to an aquatic environment, the individual does not suffer the usual -2 penalty to attack actions in or under water (p. 158, *Run & Gun*).

ASTRAL BRUTE

Type: M **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always

While all Infected stand with one foot in the astral and one foot in the mundane world, Infected people with this power have a greater ability to bring their physical might into play on the astral plane. Infected

INFECTED OPTIONAL POWERS

QUALITY	KARMA	REFERENCE
Armor (per point)	0	p. 394, *SR5*
Compulsion	9	p. 395, *SR5*
Enhanced Sense (Hearing)	3	p. 396, *SR5*
Enhanced Sense (Low-Light Vision)	3	p. 396, *SR5*
Enhanced Sense (Smell)	3	p. 396, *SR5*
Enhanced Sense (Taste)	3	p. 396, *SR5*
Enhanced Sense (Thermographic Vision)	3	p. 396, *SR5*
Enhanced Sense (Visual Acuity)	3	p. 396, *SR5*
Fear	9	p. 397, *SR5*
Immunity (Fire)	6	p. 397, *SR5*
Immunity (Pathogens)	6	p. 397, *SR5*
Immunity (Toxins)	6	p. 397, *SR5*
Influence	9	p. 398, *SR5*
Magical Guard	9	p. 193, *Howling Shadows*
Mist Form	12	p. 398, *SR5*
Paralyzing Howl	12	p. 399, *SR5*
Regeneration	12	p. 400, *SR5*

Note: See SR5 *and* Run Faster *for full description of Optional Powers.*

with this power add half their Magic (rounded up) as a dice pool modifier to Astral Combat tests with unarmed or natural weapons against non-manifested spirits, Mana Barriers, and other wholly astral targets (see Astral Combat, p. 315, *SR5*).

BACCHANAL

Type: M **Action:** Complex
Range: Self **Duration:** Sustained

The mere presence of this Infected makes resisting temptation more difficult. Those in the affected area suffer a –1 dice pool modifier on all Willpower-related tests to resist indulging in a vice, whether it be alcohol, food, sex, gambling, drugs, BTLs, or anything similar. Penalties are doubled for any vice for which an individual is addicted (Addiction quality, p. 77, *SR5*). The radius of the effect is (Magic x 10) meters.

BONE SPIKES

Type: P **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always

Razor-sharp bony deposits grow from the character's skeletal structure and poke through the skin. Characters with Bone Spikes cannot wear armor or restrictive clothing because the protruding bone spurs make it too uncomfortable. Armor and clothing can be specially designed for the character and purchased at a fifty-percent increase to the base cost. The spikes also make the character more dangerous in melee combat; unarmed melee damage for this character is (STR + 2)P.

CALCIFIED HIDE

Type: P **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always

The Infected's dermal calcifications have spread and thickened to provide more significant protection. Armor gained through Dermal Armor or the Armor Infected Power acts as Hardened Armor (p. 397, *SR5*), but it is not stackable with worn armor. As Hardened Armor, there is no damage if the incoming Damage Value is less than the armor value, and these powers now provide automatic hits equal to half the Armor bonus rounded up on Damage Resistance tests. Calcified Hide is incompatible with any artificial skin modification.

INFECTED ADVANCED OPTIONAL POWERS

QUALITY	KARMA	REFERENCE
Amphibious	6	p. 156
Astral Brute	9	p. 156
Bacchanal	9	p. 157
Bone Spikes	5	p. 157
Calcified Hide	12	p. 157
Corrosive Spit	9	p. 395, *SR5*
Deathlock Venom	9	p. 159
Darkness	9	p.189, *Howling Shadows*
Desire Reflection	9	p. 194, *Street Grimoire*
Digitigrade Legs	6	p. 159
Drag Down	6	p. 159
Dread Feast	12	p. 159
Dual Concealment	9	p. 160
Evolved Reflexes	12	p. 160
Feral Dash	6	p. 160
Gnashing Teeth	6	p. 160
Immunity (Cold)	6	p. 397, *SR5*
Metahuman Masque	12	p. 160
Mimicry	9	p. 398, *SR5*
Morningstar Fall	9	p. 161
Mystic Armor (per point)	6	p. 161
Plague Bearer	12	p. 161
Pounce	9	p. 193, *Howling Shadows*
Predator's Glamour	9	p. 161
Psychokinesis	9	p. 400, *SR5*
Rat King	12	p. 162
Scythe Claws	6	p. 162
Secretion/Substance Extrusion (Anti-Coagulant)	9	p. 193, *Howling Shadows*
Silence	9	p. 199, *Street Grimoire*
Sonic Shriek	9	p. 162
Spines	6	p. 162
Stupefying Miasma	9	p. 162
Terrorscape	12	p. 162
Traceless Walk	9	p. 163
Tunneling Claws	6	p. 163
Wall Walking	9	p. 194, *Howling Shadows*

CORROSIVE SPIT

Type: P **Action:** Complex
Range: Special **Duration:** Instant

The Infected can wretch up and expel a corrosive bile. This functions as the Critter Power, p. 395, *SR5*, with the following exceptions: The Infected is immune to its own corrosive spit. This power can be used once every (10 - Body) minutes (minimum 1 minute) as the stomach requires some time to produce a sufficient quantity of concentrated acid.

DARKNESS

Type: P **Action:** Complex
Range: LOS **Duration:** Sustained

As Critter Power, p. 189, *Howling Shadows*.

DEATHLOCK VENOM

Type: P **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always

Damage caused by the venom of the Infected leaves a lingering effect. Make an extra mark in each box of Physical damage caused by this critter's attacks, denoting that it is deathlocked. Each of these boxes count as two boxes of damage for the purposes of healing only—count each deathlocked box of damage as a single box for wound penalties, total damage taken, knockdown, and so on. If a deathlocked box is healed by only one box of healing, it becomes a box of normal damage.

DESIRE REFLECTION

Type: M **Action:** Complex
Range: LOS **Duration:** Sustained

As critter power, p. 194, *Street Grimoire*.

DIGITIGRADE LEGS

Type: P **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always

The character's legs are shaped like a quadruped's hindlegs, possessing paws rather than humanoid feet. The legs grow more hair, like those of a dog or wolf. A character with Digitigrade Legs increases their Running rate to (Agility x 6) and also adds +1m/turn to their Sprint increase (see **Movement**, p. 161, *SR5*). The legs also provide a +2 Strength modifier to the damage of any kicking attacks.

DRAG DOWN

Type: P **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always

The Infected can snatch up a victim and drag them off into the night to feed at their leisure. When using Subdual combat (p. 195, *SR5*), the Infected can move using any of their usual movement types (walking, swimming, flying) while maintaining the grapple. The Infected can move at their Walk rate while maintaining the grapple, dragging their opponent with them. This movement is part of the Complex Action to maintain the hold. Additional Subdual abilities dealing damage or knocking down the opponent cannot be used in conjunction with this movement.

DREAD FEAST

Type: P **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always

The Infected has the ability to create a potent and highly addictive magical preparation called amrita, which confers supernatural powers on metahumans who consume it. The creation of amrita is similar to the process to create Renfield, though the effects of the substance are quite different.

Creating amrita requires the Infected to draw approximately 250mL of their own blood and then combine it with certain exotic reagents, which are known only to the Infected. The mixture is then applied to an alcoholic beverage or a piece of fruit. Once the ingredients are combined, the Infected performs a special ritual in which they sacrifice 1 point of Essence and imbue it into the preparation. This creation process is an extended Alchemy + Magic [Astral] (18, 12 hours) Test. Any glitches during this test cause the drug to impart one point of Essence per glitch less to the imbiber when taken. A critical glitch means the ritual fails and the Infected loses the point of Essence for nothing. Edge may be spent on this test.

Once the preparation is complete, the Infected convinces or tricks a victim into imbibing the magical alcohol or fruit. Amrita is highly addictive both psychologically and physically, so victims can become addicted after even one dose. Once the victim has become addicted to the substance, they become the Infected's pawn, gaining the Regeneration power (p. 400, *SR5*) and the Essence Loss weakness (p. 401, *SR5*). Regeneration remains in effect as long as the pawn receives a regular dose of amrita. What constitutes "regular" is left to the

gamemaster's discretion, but most Infected won't give a dose more frequently than once every three months due to the great personal expense involved in creating it.

Once transformed, the pawn is dependent upon the substance to maintain their Essence. Even if they break the habit, they still retain the Essence Loss weakness as long as the Infected who created it still lives. Each dose gives the pawn 1D6 points of Essence. The pawn can carry up to twice their natural Essence, just like a vampire. If an amrita addict breaks their addiction and the Infected who fed them the drug is killed, their Essence stabilizes at one point less than it was before the addiction, or stays at its current level, whichever is less. Pawns addicted to amrita have a sixth sense when near the Infected who gave it to them, much like from a group bond ritual (Essence in meters). As with other preparations, an Awakened individual can assense a dram of Amrita for the creator's astral signature (p. 295, *SR5*).

AMRITA

Vector	Ingestion
Speed	1 Combat Turn
Duration	7 days
Addiction Type	Psychological and Physical
Effect	+1 Body, +1 Charisma, +1 Physical and Social Limit, High Pain Tolerance 3 (SR5 p. 74), Euphoria (8 – Body hours, minimum 1 hour)
Addiction Rating	8
Addiction Threshold	3

RENFIELD (SR5)

Vector	Ingestion, Injection
Speed	1 Combat Turn
Duration	7 days
Addiction Type	Both
Effect	Agility +1, Intuition +1, Strength +1, +1 Physical Limit, Euphoria (8 – Body hours, minimum 1 hour), +1D6 Initiative
Addiction Rating	8
Addiction Threshold	3

DUAL CONCEALMENT

Type: M **Action:** Simple
Range: LOS **Duration:** Sustained

The Infected is as difficult to notice using astral sight as it is using mundane vision. This power functions similar to the Concealment power (p. 395, *SR5*), though it affects Assensing tests as well as Perception tests used to locate the concealed subject.

EVOLVED REFLEXES

Type: P **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always

Further viral mutation speeds up the reflexes of the Infected. They gain +1 Initiative die. This ability is not cumulative with mundane augmentations.

FERAL DASH

Type: P **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always

The Infected's body structure has mutated in a way that allows it to shift into a loping quadrupedal gait, allowing for frighteningly fast bursts of speed. When moving in this stance, the Infected gains +1 to movement rate, but they must have their hands free.

GNASHING TEETH

Type: P **Action**: Auto
Range: Self **Duration**: Always

Due to several mutations to the structure of the jaw and teeth, including hardened tooth enamel and the development of chiseled incisors, the Infected has developed exceptional ability to damage objects with their bite. The teeth of the Infected grow continuously, counteracting the wear from their gnawing. Without near-constant wear, the regeneration of their teeth can impair their ability to eat or even pierce their skull in extreme instances.

Multiply the Infected's base DV by 2 when using their bite to damage an object, barrier, or other static structure. This applies to both physical and magical barriers. This damage increase does not apply to bite attacks against creatures.

METAHUMAN MASQUE

Type: M **Action**: Complex
Range: Self **Duration**: Sustained

The legend of the Lamia describes them as having a metahuman upper body with the lower body of

a serpent. Academics argue as to whether this ability is the origin of the legend or if the legend shaped the current reality. The Lamia can shift their form, transforming their serpentine head and part of their body into a metahuman upper body. Their lower body remains serpentine. By concealing their lower body, the Lamia can more easily lure in their prey.

This transformation does not alter any attributes or movement speed, but the usual bite attack is inaccessible in this form. Having arms allows the use of metahuman tools, and having a metahuman head and torso allows the use of upper-body clothing or headgear made for metahumans. The appearance is always of the same metahuman, is usually human, and matches the Infected's typical gender expression.

MIMICRY

Type: P **Action**: Simple
Range: Self **Duration**: Sustained
As critter power, p. 398, *SR5*.

MORNINGSTAR FALL

Type: P **Action**: Auto
Range: Self **Duration**: Always
The Infected can drop from great heights without suffering injury. The maximum distance the Infected can fall (in meters) without suffering injury is equal to their Magic x 3. If the Infected falls a greater distance, subtract the maximum distance of the spell before calculating damage (see p. 172, *SR5*). This spell does not slow the Infected's fall but prevents injury by magically absorbing their kinetic energy on impact, making the landing eerily silent.

MYSTIC ARMOR

Type: M **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always
The Infected is not only extremely durable in the physical world but is resilient against attacks from astral foes as well. This power functions in the same way as Armor, except that it only provides protection from attacks on the astral plane. Damage originating from an opponent entirely on the astral is resisted with Willpower + (ranks of Mystic Armor).

PLAGUE BEARER

Type: P **Action:** Auto
Range: Self **Duration:** Always
The Infected becomes a walking harbinger of pestilence. They readily become infected with diseases and act as carriers, able to pass them on to others. The HMHVV alters their immune system, completely protecting them from the negative effects of disease yet allowing all manner of bacteria and viruses to persist in their system. Any target taking Physical damage from the Infected's natural attacks makes a Disease Resistance Test (Body + Willpower + any disease protections or resistances). Use the following stat block for the cocktail of diseases they harbor.

PLAGUE-BEARER DISEASE

Vector	Injection
Speed	1 Combat Turn
Penetration	Infected's Magic Rating / 2
Power	Infected's Magic Rating
Effect	Nausea, Stun Damage

Note: The disease remains on the target for a day and may pass to other living beings.

PREDATOR'S GLAMOUR

Type: M **Action**: Complex
Range: Self **Duration**: Sustained
The Infected alters the perceptions of beings within its sphere of influence, preventing others from viewing the deathly pale, huge, cannibalistic mass of muscle and spikes as a threat. This power works on the subconscious, so victims rationalize any inconsistencies in what they see, making it part of the illusion, even with special vision, drone feeds, astral perception, or even their friends' warnings. This illusion only hides the predatory nature of the Infected itself, not their actions, so if the Infected pulled out a gun and pointed it at the victim they would see it as a threat.

Predator's Glamour affects all beings within (Magic x 10) meters. The Infected sets the threshold of the illusion with a Charisma + Magic Test. Another being encountering the illusion makes a free Intuition + Willpower test, and if they don't get enough hits to meet or beat the threshold, they are fully taken in by the glamour. Even after leaving the sphere of influence, they may think back on the encounter and still not realize that they had a brush with death unless confronted with evidence to the contrary.

PSYCHOKINESIS

Type: P **Action**: Complex
Range: LOS **Duration**: Sustained
As Critter Power, p. 400, *SR5*

RAT KING

Type: M **Action**: Auto
Range: Magic x 25m **Duration**: Always
The Infected can join in the Gestalt Consciousness of any critter that possesses this ability and where one or more members are under the effect of their Animal Control (Vermin) power. This power cannot be used to link with other Infected. This ability otherwise functions as the Gestalt Consciousness critter power (p. 192, *Howling Shadows*).

SECRETION/SUBSTANCE EXTRUSION (ANTI-COAGULANT)

Type: P **Action**: Auto
Range: Self **Duration**: Always
As critter power, p. 193, *Howling Shadows*.

SCYTHE CLAWS

Type: P **Action**: Auto
Range: Self **Duration**: Always
The Infected's claws have grown larger and sharper, making them more formidable weapons. Increase the damage of the claws by +1 and reduce the AP by -1 (e.g., so that -2 becomes -3). Any tests requiring manual dexterity except Unarmed Combat have a -1 dice pool modifier.

SILENCE

Type: M **Action**: Complex
Range: Special **Duration**: Sustained
As critter power, p. 199, *Street Grimoire*. The Infected cannot use any sonic abilities while this power is active.

SONIC SHRIEK

Type: P **Action**: Complex
Range: Special **Duration**: Sustained
This power hits the target with a wave of unbelievably loud noise and gut-churning vibrations. The power is a ranged sonic attack, with range increments of (Magic) meters. The Infected attacks with Exotic Ranged Weapon + Agility [Physical] vs. Reaction + Intuition. The DV is (Magic)S. Damage is resisted with Body only, as Armor offers no protection. Gear such as damper earware adds its dice to resist the attack (p. 454, *SR5*). Spells like Silence and Hush (p. 291, *SR5*) reduce the attacker's dice pool. If the target suffers more damage boxes than their Willpower, they are deafened for (Magic) minutes.

SPINES

Type: P **Action**: Auto
Range: Self **Duration**: Always
These modified scales and fin ridges sprout along the limbs, head, and back. Spines are two to four centimeters long, sharp as needles, and they detach easily when used in close combat. Spines are a defensive mechanism to hold off attackers. If the character is successfully grappled in close combat (see **Subduing**, p. 195, *SR5*), the attacker makes a Damage Resistance Test against a DV of (STR + 1)P, AP +1, using the higher Strength attribute of the grappling pair. Spines can be wielded in melee combat using the Exotic Melee Weapon (Spines) skill, with the following stats: DV (STR + 1)P, Reach —, AP +1. The character's appendages must be exposed and mobile to use any of these advantages. Spines are incompatible with other natural or artificial hair or skin modifications.

STUPEFYING MIASMA

Type: P **Action**: Simple
Range: Self **Duration**: Sustained
The Infected has a powerful, sickeningly sweet odor that dulls the minds of those exposed to it. The effect of this power extends (Magic x 2) meters from the Infected. Other Infected are not affected by it. Make an Opposed Test of the Infected's Magic + Body against the victim's Body + Willpower. Any modifiers to inhalation-vector toxins apply. Those who fail to resist the miasma suffer a -2 penalty to all skills based on Mental attributes, and all Knowledge tests have a fifty percent chance of failure regardless of number of hits (roll 1D6; automatic failure on 1-3).

TERRORSCAPE

Type: M **Action**: Complex
Range: Special **Duration**: Sustained
This ability overwhelms the mind of its victims with the unholy power of the monstrous creature before them. They perceive shadows with gnashing teeth surrounding them, glowing eyes watching

them hungrily from every direction, swarms of skittering vermin boiling out of the walls, or tendrils of blood writhing across the floor toward them.

To use this power, the critter must succeed in an Opposed Test pitting its Magic + Willpower against the target's Willpower + Logic. If it scores any net hits, the victim falls for the illusion. Otherwise the power fails to affect the victim. Affected targets suffer a -2 dice pool modifier to all actions. If the Infected scores more net hits than the victim's Willpower, the victim is paralyzed with fear and unable to take any actions. The terror lasts for 1 Combat Turn per net hit scored by the Infected. This is a mana-based illusion, and any ability that grants a resistance to fear adds to the victim's roll. The effect is centered on the Infected with a radius of (Magic x 2) meters, affecting anyone within this range.

TRACELESS WALK

Type: P **Action**: Auto
Range: Self **Duration**: Always
As adept power, p. 311, *SR5*.

TUNNELING CLAWS

Type: P **Action**: Auto
Range: Self **Duration**: Always
Some infected have developed hardened claws that allow them to dig vast tunnels and warrens underground to shield them from the deadly rays of the sun. These claws provide a +2 dice pool modifier to all tests involving digging or moving earth. These claws also function as a natural weapon, dealing DV (STR+1)P, AP -1. If the Infected already possesses claws, reduce the AP by -1.

WALL WALKING

Type: P **Action**: Auto
Range: Self **Duration**: Always
As critter power, p. 194, *Howling Shadows*.

INFECTED QUALITIES

WILDCARD CHIMERA

HMHVV is evolving in you, for better or worse. You may select any Infected Optional Powers (but not Advanced Optional Powers) regardless of your Infected type. When selecting an ability, roll on the Wildcard Chimera Negative Qualities

TECHNOLOGICAL ADAPTATION

Physicians in Asamando have been researching ways to deal with some of the problems the different varieties of Infected face due to their condition. A team of ghoul cybertech researchers have produced one of the rare successes, a bioware implant that helps loup-garou manage their monthly … difficulties. Having citizens who rampage uncontrollably four days a month has proven to be a significant social problem.

This bioware implant, tailored to suit the genetic profile of Strain 2 Infected, is a significant modification of existing adrenaline pump technology. Like the adrenaline pump, the adrenaline filter (as it is called) is implanted in the lower abdomen connected to the supradrenal glands. The adrenaline filter has an improved ability to absorb adrenaline from the bloodstream. When the artificial gland detects a large release of adrenaline by the supradrenal glands, it rapidly absorbs and neutralizes the hormone.

The adrenaline filter allows the loup-garou to resist going berserk during the peak of its monthly cycle. During the four-day peak of a loup-garou's cycle, they must make a Charisma + Willpower + (Rating of the adrenaline filter – 1) Test (wound modifiers apply) whenever they take Physical damage or are exposed to extreme stress (gamemaster's discretion). They go berserk for 3 Combat Turns minus 1 turn per hit, so 3 or more hits averts the berserk rage entirely. If they are already going berserk, increase the duration. A berserk loup-garou fights as if they had a Rating 3 adrenaline pump, as usual. The gland's function can be turned off and on as a Free Action as long as the Infected is not currently going berserk.

ADRENALINE FILTER

RATING	ESSENCE	AVAIL	COST
(1-3)	Rating x 0.5	(Rating x 3)R*	Rating x 35,000¥

** The adrenaline filter is only currently available in Asamando.*

table below and gain that quality. Subtract the Karma discount from the cost of the new ability. No quality can have the cost reduced below 1 Karma. As an alternate option, negative qualities can be chosen at the gamemaster's discretion.

IT WORKS IF YOU WORK IT

COST: 5 KARMA

Due to either psychological resilience or physical fortitude, you are more resistant to the threat of Essence addiction. You gain a +2 dice pool modifier against addiction rolls due to Essence Drain.

SOUL SWALLOWER

COST: 7 KARMA

With practice, the Infected can drain Essence at twice the normal rate. This, however, makes it more likely to get addicted. Draining two points of Essence takes an Extended Charisma + Magic (10 – target's Essence, 1 minute) Test. The Infected takes a -2 dice pool modifier on Addiction Tests to resist Essence Drain addiction. The Infected can choose to drain only one point of Essence to avoid this negative modifier.

METAVIRAL ATTUNEMENT

COST: 5 KARMA

Every strain of HMHVV has certain magical predilections. With focus and skill, the Infected can discover these latencies and use them to enhance their spellcasting.

- **Bandersnatch:** +2 dice pool bonus when casting Illusion spells with a visual component
- **Banshee:** +2 dice pool bonus when casting all silence or sonic-based spells
- **Chiron:** +2 dice pool bonus when conjuring spirits of man
- **Dzoo-Noo-Qua:** +2 dice pool bonus when casting Manipulation spells targeting themselves
- **Fomóraig:** +2 dice pool bonus when conjuring spirits of water or earth (choose one)
- **Ghoul:** +2 dice pool bonus when casting Health spells that affect their target negatively
- **Gnawer:** +2 dice pool bonus when casting Combat spells that deal acid damage
- **Goblin:** + 2 dice when casting Combat spells that deal fire damage
- **Grendel:** +2 dice pool bonus when casting Detection spells
- **Harvester:** +2 dice pool bonus to Combat spells which deal cold damage
- **Jabberwock:** +2 to Counterspelling tests
- **Lamia:** +2 dice pool bonus to Manipulation spells targeting themselves
- **Loup-Garou:** +2 dice pool bonus when conjuring spirits of Beasts
- **Mutaqua:** +2 dice pool bonus to Counterspelling tests
- **Nibiinaabe:** +2 dice pool bonus when conjuring spirits of Water
- **Nosferatu:** +2 dice pool bonus to Alchemy tests when their own blood is used in creating the preparation
- **Vampire:** +2 dice pool bonus to Manipulation spells that affect the mind or emotions
- **Wendigo:** +2 dice pool bonus to Ritual Spellcasting where they are the leader and there at least two other participants

WILDCARD CHIMERA NEGATIVE QUALITIES

2D6 ROLL	KARMA DISCOUNT	QUALITY	REF
2	–1	Third Eye	p. 122, *Run Faster*
3	–2	Scent Glands	p. 121, *Run Faster*
4	–3	Scales	p. 121, *Run Faster*
5	–3	Critter Spook	p. 120, *Run Faster*
6	–3	Cold-Blooded	p. 120, *Run Faster*
7	–3	Bioluminescence	p. 119, *Run Faster*
8	–4	Cyclopean Eye	p. 120, *Run Faster*
9	–4	Berserker	p. 119, *Run Faster*
10	–6	Astral Hazing (Awakened)	p. 119, *Run Faster*
11	–8	Impaired (Mental Attribute, choose one)	p. 120, *Run Faster*
12	3	Player's Choice	—

NEW MAGIC

DARK MAGIC TRADITION

Dark Magic is not a tradition that sees much formal use, due to societal prejudice and an inherent fragility. While Black Magic is a relentless drive to power and dominion, Dark Magic is at once elemental and petty in that it depends upon the ego to impose the will of the mage onto reality. In essence, it is the evolution of New Age Satanism, which does not command obedience, but insists upon individual pursuit of godhead, usually through dramatic rejection of servitude (which does not preclude making a Faustian "deal"). Blasphemy and psychodrama are used to build a sense of self-empowerment to achieve arcane focus. The type of personality this attracts is often insecure and self-important, and the validation of magic can very often lead these mages to pure egomania. Its magic can do anything, but its users are rarely benevolent to others.

Dark mages utilize magic in a raw fashion, demanding the best of themselves and adhering to exercises of minor blasphemy and logic to focus their will to shaping mana and forming spirits. When successful, these mages are close to understanding the Unified Magical Theory. When they fail, they often fall into depression and uncertainty. This means dark mages are more likely to burn out due to a lack of faith in themselves. It is the rare Dark Mage who can use their ego without becoming beholden to it.

Dark mage conjurations may appear to be minor demons and spirits that the mage dominates into servitude, but many also appear as shadowy reflections of the caster, seemingly reformed into their master's shape as extensions of their will. While these shadows are quite obedient, they are also known to act upon the id of the conjuror, sometimes fulfilling requests in a fashion the caster secretly desires, regardless of whether it is to the outward benefit or detriment of the caster.

Their ritual work is laden with the trappings of occultism, and many of their spells can be learned in hermetic or Theurgist form, though the caster will use a blasphemous inversion of the process to highlight their triumph over doctrine and dogma. The most likely mentor spirit archetype is the Adversary.

Infected are notable among their membership due to the practice of the tradition among certain vampiric covens. It is hardly surprising; vampires often justify their existence and habits by extolling their superiority over normal metahumanity, and that kind of self-serving pride makes Dark Magic both tempting and easy.

Drain attribute is Charisma + Willpower.

Combat: Fire
Health: Water
Detection: Earth
Illusion: Air
Manipulation: Man

INFECTION-SPECIFIC METAMAGIC

Essence Expansion: The Infected increases the maximum amount of Essence they can store through their Essence Drain power by one point per Initiate rank. For example, a Vampire has a maximum Essence of 12 and then takes Essence Expansion upon gaining Initiate grade 2, so their maximum Essence is now 14.

Enhanced Mist Form: The Infected gains additional control over their Mist Form power. They can move 10 meters per Combat Turn in Mist Form.

BLOOD MAGIC EXPANDED METAMAGIC TECHNIQUE

ECHO BINDING

(SACRIFICE, INVOKING, NECROMANCY)
The blood mage can bind the memories of a sacrifice into the blood spirit, giving it access to skills and memories. Use the Active and Knowledge skills of the sacrifice or the blood spirit, whichever is higher. No skill gained from a sacrifice can have more ranks than the Force of the blood spirit. A blood spirit can only use the skills and memories of one sacrificed individual.

INFECTED ARCHETYPES

THE VAMPIRE PI

VAMPIRE OCCULT INVESTIGATOR

It's a job that keeps odd hours, requires getting into strange places, and can turn violent in a heartbeat. With their enhanced senses and dual nature, the perception of an occult investigator can only be improved with Infection. The PI keeps his old contacts in the department, and attends classes in Necromancy through university in New Orleans. With dedication, even the secrets of spilled blood will reveal themselves to the vampire PI.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDS	M
4	4	4	3	5	3	7	5	7.0	3	5

Initiative	11 + 1D6
Condition Monitor	10/11
Limits	Physical 5, Mental 7, Social 8
Armor	9
Skills	Arcana 3, Assensing 4, Con 3, Impersonation 4, (Human +2), Perception 4, Pistols 3, Spellcasting 5, Summoning 3, Unarmed Combat 4
Qualities	Magician, Perceptive 2
Gear	Lined coat, Renraku Sensei Commlink [Device Rating 3]
Spells	Analyze Truth, Detect Individual, Magebolt, Physical Mask, Stunbolt, Stealth, Vampiric Speed
Infected Type	Vampire (Human)
Optional Powers	Mist Form, Regeneration
Weapons	Cavalier Deputy [Heavy Pistol: DV 7P, AP –1, RC —, SA, 7(cy) w/ 50 rounds standard ammo]

THE TAMANOUS MEAT RUNNER

GHOUL SMUGGLER/MEDIC

Tamanous fills a necessary, if unsavory, role in the black clinic ecology, supplying fresh parts for paying customers and getting rid of what can't be otherwise used. The Meat Runner is a smuggler focusing on biological components. While the ghoul could make a fortune turning her talents to more standard smuggling, this specialized line of work means she can make big credit smuggling small special orders. Plus, she has the resources and talents to make quick work of cleaning up bodies during runs gone wrong. If she sidelines into actual runs, she knows all the tricks for staying under the radar and makes an excellent field medic—if she can resist taking a nibble for herself.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDS	M
4	4	6(7)	3	4	4	3	2	3.2	2	0

Initiative	11 + 1D6
Condition Monitor	11
Limits	Physical 5(6), Mental 5, Social 4
Armor	14
Skills	Electronic Warfare 3, First Aid 4, Medicine 4, Navigation 2, Pilot Ground Craft 4 (Bike +2), Pistols 3, Survival 2, Unarmed Combat 4
Qualities	Gearhead
Gear	Bike racing armor and helmet, medkit (Rating 3), MCT Blue Defender commlink (rating 3), 3 tranq patches (Rating 6)
Vehicles	Horizon-Doble Revolution (w/ rigger interface, sidecar w/ refrigerated smuggling compartment)
Augmentations	Control rig (Rating 1), cybereyes (Rating 1, w/ low-light, thermographic), reaction enhancers 2
Infected Type	Ghoul (Human)
Optional Powers	Armor +2
Weapons	Bite [Natural Weapon, Reach –1, DV 4P, AP –1] Browning Ultra-Power [Heavy Pistol, Acc 5(6), DV 8P, AP –1, SA, RC —, 10(c), w/ 50 rounds regular ammo] Claws [Natural Weapon, Reach —, DV 5P, AP –1]

THE ORDO INITIATE

NOSFERATU MAGE

Nosferatu are possibly the most powerful of all Infected breeds, requiring less Essence and commanding great powers. These come at a price, however, and none of these are so subtle as the paranoia and megalomania that seeps into these individuals. To such a creature, the camaraderie, power, exclusivity, and hope of relief make the Ordo Maximus an attractive organization. Dark and powerful techniques to be learned and a web of influence to hide behind, the Initiate must still prove their worth with dirty work and demonstrations of skill. Some find working in the shadows a fine way to test their abilities, learn more, foster additional powers, and feed. Who knows what opportunities will avail themselves?

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDS	M
5	4	4	4	5	4	2	6	10.0	4	7

Initiative	7 + 2D6
Condition Monitor	11/11
Limits	Physical 6, Mental 6, Social 9
Armor	8
Skills	Arcana 3, Assensing 4, Astral Combat 3, Con 3, Etiquette 2, Negotiation 3, Sorcery skill group 4, Summoning 4, Unarmed Combat 2
Qualities	Magician
Gear	Fairlight Caliban commlink (Rating 7), Mortimer of London Summit suit (8)
Spells	Agony, Astral Armor, Blood Puppet, Blood Whip, Ghoulish Strength, Improved Invisibility, Manaball, Physical Barrier, Stunball, Trid Phantasm
Initiate Grade	2 (Masking, Sacrifice)
Infected Type	Nosferatu (Human)
Optional Powers	Compulsion, Immunity (Pathogens, Toxins), Regeneration
Weapons	Bite [Natural Weapon, Reach –1, DV 5P, AP –1]

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDS	M
8	4	2	6	4	4	4	4	5.0	4	4

Initiative	7 + 2D6
Condition Monitor	12/10
Limits	Physical 9, Mental 5, Social 6
Armor	12
Skills	Assensing 2, Automatics 3, Chemistry 3, Con 4, Counterspelling 2, Demolitions 4, Etiquette 3, Impersonation 4, Perception 2, Spellcasting 4, Summoning 3, Unarmed Combat 4
Qualities	Magician
Gear	Armor jacket (12), Erika Elite commlink (Rating 4)
Spells	Control Emotions, Detect Enemies, Heal, Mana Bolt, Physical Mask
Infected Type	Wendigo (Ork)
Optional Powers	Fear, Immunity (Pathogens), Influence
Weapons	Bite [Natural Weapon, Reach –1, DV 9P, AP –1] Claws [Natural Weapon, Reach —, DV 10P, AP –1] Colt Cobra TZ-120 [Submachine Gun, Acc 4(5), DV 7P, AP —, SA/BF/FA, RC 2(3), 32(C), w/ 100 rds standard ammo]

FEAR THE DARK TERRORIST

WENDIGO SHAMAN

Mortals are weak. Mortals are food. Mortals will eat each other in your name. And mortals need to learn their place. Any runner foolish enough to work with you is already your prey as you begin subtly influencing their mind, luring them into acts of depravity that season their souls for your enjoyment. In the meantime, you may run with them for profit, practice, or simple pleasure. Your command of metahuman perceptions means you can disguise your true form and beguile foes with ease, often turning them against one another, and your understanding of psychological, explosive, and chemical warfare means you are capable of destruction on any level you please, with plenty of room for collateral damage.

PIED PIPER

GNAWER SECURITY SPIDER

Your building in the barrens only has rats where you want them. That alone gets you free rent. Through them, you are everywhere. That thought appeals. You expanded your skillset to include a little decking and a lot of rigging. When you actually left your building, you found you could take others over the same way. Extortion isn't really your style, and it's a great way to get hunted. No, better to join a team that can fill in the spaces you can't. You change the field of battle for any team you join. Your furry friends can get almost anywhere you can't, they can swarm foes, flood vents, scout, and scurry into impossible places. You can become the building. The doors. The cameras. The rats in the walls.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDS	M
4	2	5	4	5	5(6)	4	2	4.0	4	4

Initiative	9 + 1D6
Condition Monitor	10/11
Limits	Physical 6, Mental 7, Social 4
Armor	11
Skills	Animal Handling 4 (Vermin +2), Armorer 3, Assensing 3, Cracking skill group 2, Electronics skill group 2, Engineering skill group 3, Gunnery 5, Perception 5, Pilot Aircraft 5, Pilot Ground Craft 5, Pistols 3, Sneaking 3, Unarmed Combat 2
Qualities	Animal Empathy
Gear	MCT Nissan Roto Drone w/ weapon mount (Colt M23), Proteus Poseidon RCC (rating 5), Pulse Wave commlink (Device Rating 6), Urban Explorer Jumpsuit (9)
Augmentations	Control Rig 1 (alphaware), cerebral booster 1
Infected Type	Gnawer (Dwarf)
Optional Powers	Armor +2, Rat King
Weapons	Bite [Natural Weapon, Reach –1, DV 6P, AP —] Fichetti Executive Action (Light Pistol: DV 7P, AP —, Acc7, SA/BF, RC —, 18(c) w/ laser sight, 50 rounds standard ammo]

ESCAPED SUBJECT

ANY INFECTED; BASIC CIVILIAN TEMPLATE, ADD WILDCARD CHIMERA QUALITY

You didn't ask for this. You were just minding your own business, coming home from another sixteen-hour shift at AG Chemie, when you were kidnapped. You woke up in a cell, thirstier than ever before in your life. Only after feeding did you really come to realize what you had done. They experimented on you. Allergens, UV light, then real sunlight through fiber optics. Then it got worse. Days or longer of unending pain as they strapped you to the table and pumped you with fluids, probed you with machines, leaving your cells twisting in your skin. They sounded surprised at your survival. You wondered if it would be better to be dead. You probably would have died down there if those runners hadn't busted into the facility. Most of the other Infected subjects were killed by incineration safeguards. You were one of the few who broke out. Some of those were insane from their treatments. Others just cut and run. You stuck with the team that freed you. They understand what you have become about as well as you do, and you worry they'll decide to turn you over to whoever offers the most money. Your best asset is your worst liability: You don't know what you are capable of.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDS	M
7	3	4	6	4	2	4	2	5.0	2	2

Initiative	8 + 1D6
Condition Monitor	12/10
Limits	Physical 8, Mental 4, Social 4
Armor	12
Skills	Counterspelling 2, Escape Artist 2, Etiquette 2, Perception 2, Running 3, Sneaking 2, Throwing Weapons 2, Unarmed Combat 2
Qualities	Wildcard Chimera, Berserk, Scales
Gear	Armored jacket (12), Meta Link commlink (Rating 1)
Infected Type	Grendel (Ork)
Optional Powers	Darkness, Immunity (Fire), Magical Guard
Weapons	Bite [Natural Weapon, Reach –1, DV 7P, AP –1] Claw [Natural Weapon, DV 7P, AP –1] 2 flash-bang grenades [Grenade, DV 10S, AP –4, 10m radius]

INFECTED HITMAN

BANSHEE SPEC OPS/ASSASSIN

You were good before the woman came in the night to steal your soul. Now you're one of the best. Mist form for infiltration, supernatural terror to scare off pursuit or lead your quarry to traps you have set, and regeneration for when they fight back. Your reflexes aren't as sharp as when you had wires, but you're still faster than anyone without them, and they say if you can save up for deltaware, you'll be all you were and this, too. Till then, the kills fatten your credder and batten your soul. You could do this forever. Maybe you will.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDS	M
3	4	5	4	4	3	3	5	8.0	3	3

Initiative	8 + 2D6
Condition Monitor	10/10
Limits	Physical 6, Mental 5, Social 8
Armor	11
Skills	Armorer 2, Athletics skill group 2, Blades 3, Firearms skill group 4, Locksmith 2, Negotiation 2, Perception 3, Sneaking 2, Tracking 3, Unarmed Combat 3
Qualities	Guts, Addiction: Cram (Mild)
Gear	Autopicker (rating 6), ballistic mask (+2), chameleon suit (9), cram (4 doses), Erika Elite commlink (Rating 4), nitro (2 doses)
Infected Type	Banshee (Elf)
Optional Powers	Fear, Immunity (Pathogens), Mist Form, Regeneration, Silent Aura
Weapons	Ares Desert Strike [Sniper Rifle, DV 13P, AP –4, SA, RC 1, 14(c) w/ 50 rounds standard ammo) Bite [Natural Weapon, Reach –1, DV 5P, AP –1] Combat knife [Blade, DV 5P, AP –3] Remington Suppressor [Machine Pistol, DV 7P, AP –1, SA/BF, RC —, 15(c) w/ 50 rounds standard ammo)

THE MOBILE FORTRESS

DZOO-NOO-QUA MERC

A stint in the Carib League saw you end up in a Sukuyan's feeding pit. Your crew managed to pull you free, and you managed to keep it together when they didn't put you down a second time. Now you're bigger than before and covered in enough regenerative bone plate to make you all but invulnerable. Yeah, it's hard to think clearly sometimes (thank goodness for friends you can trust), and the sunlight problems suck, but you were never much of a looker, and considering you have gunned down people for years, drinking their blood isn't that much worse. Plus, you can dual-wield heavy machine guns while absorbing high-caliber rounds. Your crew might hide behind you, but you're no meat shield. You're a freight train from Hell.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDS	M
11	7	4	8	6	7	3	2	8.0	2	4

Initiative	7 + 2D6
Condition Monitor	16/13
Limits	Physical 11, Mental 4, Social 6
Armor	15
Skills	Armorer 3, Counterspelling 3, Heavy Weapons 4, Perception 2, Running 2, Unarmed Combat 4
Qualities	Adept, High Pain Tolerance 2
Gear	Armor vest (9), forearm guards (+1), helmet (+2), Renraku Sensai commlink (Rating 3)
Adept Powers	Adrenaline Boost 4, Combat Sense 2, Supernatural Toughness 2
Infected Type	Dzoo-Noo-Qua (Troll)
Optional Powers	Armor +2, Magical Guard, Regeneration
Weapons	Combat axe [Blade, DV 13P, AP –4, Acc 4] Krime Wave [Light Machine Gun, Acc 5, DV 10P, AP –2, RC 3, FA, 50(c) w/ gas-vent 3, 100 rounds regular ammunition]

AZTECHNOLOGY BLOODPANTHER

HUMAN VAMPIRE AZTECH WEAPONS SPECIALIST

Aztechnology does not make a big fuss over its acceptance of the Infected. Quieter still is their reverence for some of them. Among the blood mages and nahuitil, those who live forever on the heart's blood of their enemies are seen as blessed. Those who take corporate service are greatly favored, ascending to special Panther ranks. Highly educated, cultivated, and trained in both combat and religious observance, the loyalty of these vampires is unquestioning. There are no better infiltrators or bodyguards to have, and their crimson pelts, for those who recognize them, are a mark of distinction. If you feel like freelancing on the side, who is going to stand in your way? Not that you would ever act against Aztechnology. The ancestors and great spirits stand with them, and so shall you. Any other kind of run, however, can only hurt AZT enemies, and if that puts a little more money in your account, so much the better. The great spirits reward victorious warriors with vast spoils of blood and gold.

B	A	R	S	W	L	I	C	ESS	EDS	M
5	4(5)	3	3	5	2	3	4	9.0	4	4

Initiative	6 + 2D6
Condition Monitor	11/11
Limits	Physical 5, Mental 5, Social 8
Armor	15
Skills	Assensing 3, Automatics 4, Blades 4, Etiquette 3, Gymnastics 4, Heavy Weapons 2, Intimidation 1 (Interrogation +2), Perception 3, Sneaking 3, Sorcery skill group 4, Tracking 3, Unarmed Combat 3
Qualities	Mystic Adept (Aztec)
Gear	Armored jacket (12), Transys Avalon commlink (rating 6)
Spells	Camouflage, Catfall, Compel Truth, Death Touch, Ghoulish Strength, Vampiric Stealth
Adept Powers	Adrenaline Boost 4, Hang Time 2, Improved Agility 1, Mystic Armor 3
Infected Type	Vampire (Human)
Optional Powers	Immunity (Pathogens), Regeneration, Terrorscape
Weapons	AK-97 [Assault Rifle: DV 10P, AP -2, Acc 5(6), RC 2, SA/BF/FA, 38(c) w/ gas vent- 2, laser sight, 100 rounds regular ammunition] Cougar Collapsible Spear (Blades, Reach 3, Acc 5, DV6 P, AP –2]

UNTAMED METAPLANES

POSTED BY: G-NOME

In my travels, I have gone to many a strange metaplane seeking the home of some of our more unique metaplanar visitors. In said travels, I've encountered uncountable wonders along with as many unspeakable horrors. As I've been through all this—often with the assistance of some of you folks—I thought it would be worthwhile to write up a few travel briefs for some of my favorites and offer them up to JackPoint as informative pieces for anyone who may wish to stretch their metaplanar legs. The locales I've chosen also offer valuable assets for runner acquisition, so don't think this is some purely academic piece. I know better than to offer nothing but knowledge to the likes of most of you. These places are worth visiting in case someone makes an offer for access. You also might need the knowledge if you happen to find yourself in any of these places.

While I focused my write-ups for the *Howling Shadows* drop on scary predators of the world and beyond, not all the metaplanar entities I've sought had teeth and claws. Some of the creatures I studied were fleeing their home plane in fear. Even some of our scary guests were looking for safer hunting grounds. A bit to keep in mind while exploring these places.

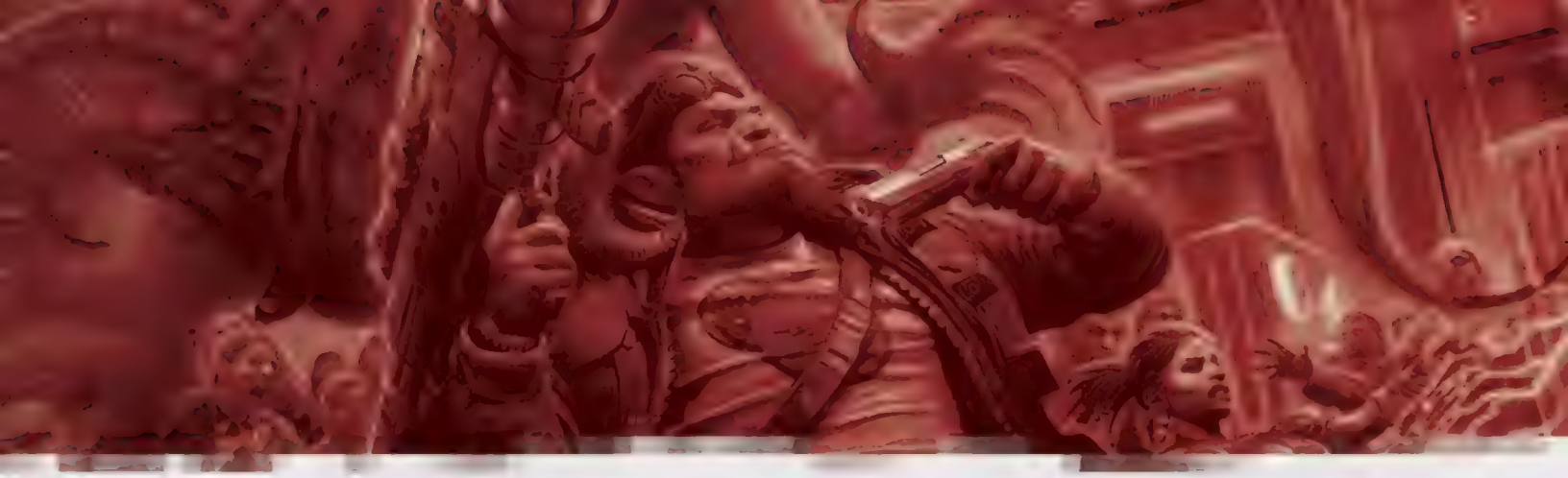
As a quick aside, I'd like to point out these names are only going to do you any good if other people have read this file. These places don't have names for themselves usually, and the ones that do often have multiple names from different entities that reside there. Our names for places are a social convention not shared by other entities. Hell, we use different names for places in our own world often enough to confuse people. The metaplanes are worse. Caveat viator

THE BLACK SKY

This place is dark, but not really. For some reason I have not discerned, this place has no light from our standard visual spectrum. You can roll in with a trillion-candlepower spotlight, and you'll get nothing but a lot of heat. On the bright side (see what I did there?), thermographic vision works just fine, but everything you see has that different visual texture and color. That's always been the best way to describe seeing with thermo. It's all about reflection and absorption, and everything in this place absorbs everything in our light spectrum but reflects most things in the thermo range. I knew a street sam who used ultrasound and radar systems—those worked, fine but he tripped a lot with radar. Don't know why; that's just how it was.

The land itself feels a lot like an alpine region on Earth. There's vegetation that thrives in the regions I've visited, mainly consisting of larger "trees" with very few ground plants. None of it is safe for consumption, with the fruits that do grow on the trees concentrating a poison that causes nausea and blindness. Local species don't suffer any of these ill effects and regularly claim patches of the forest as their territory and protect it accordingly. The worst are the glow monkeys—small capuchin-like creatures with six appendages. They swing between the branches overhead and occasionally cause trouble. When threatened, they hurl the fruit at opponents and then attack en masse to eat the seasoned meal.

One area of this plane is known as the Ruins. Though even more dangerous than the forests, the Ruins are the primary reason to come here, because they are full of treasures, both physical and otherwise. The civilization that must have existed here was skilled in methods of magic we have yet to approach. Tomes, tablets, scrolls, and manuscripts in an unknown tongue are here to study



and decipher, alongside structures built from gold, silver, platinum, gems of the entire spectrum, and best of all, orichalcum.

After several attempts, I've found that none of the arcane materials survive a return to our realm, and the physical treasures seem to only come back in limited quantities. I don't know if that's being controlled by the Dweller, or if something about the connection between our worlds limits what we can exchange. In truth, it's not something I'm willing to explore in great depth because the Ruins are guarded.

The protectors look like clouds of lightning that arc out to attack those who don't belong. I've only once managed anything that resembled an intelligent exchange when I was separated from my physical security and had no desire to get into a lightning-hurling contest with one of these things. It flashed positives and negatives to a few questions, so it understood us. I was able to discern that they don't really look like lightning but are instead "normal" metahumans who are only partially present on the same plane we are.

I went here on assignment from the Planestriders, who sold the information I provided to MCT in order to gain access to another plane where MCT had managed to insult the locals and weren't welcome back. MCT is a big proponent of metaplanar strip mining. They move onto a metaplane, figure out what they can gain from the place, assess its dangers, and then roll in with whatever resources they need to maintain operational security while pillaging the local environs. On our plane, we have groups like TerraFirst! trying to promote preservation, but out on the metaplanes there's usually no organized opposition. MCT does a lot of freelance hiring for the initial forays and even for extended operations because it's cheaper to not pay a dead runner than to pay death benefits on a citizen.

I don't sign exclusive contracts, and the info on this place also made me a little nuyen with the Draco Foundation and Astral Space Preservation Society. Both of those groups could very well be going back to gain more intel or even to operate against MCT, because no one likes to see metaplanes wrecked by greed.

- The assumptions that metaplanes are all one thing or all another, or that our vices are foreign to them, are not sound.
- Man-of-Many-Names

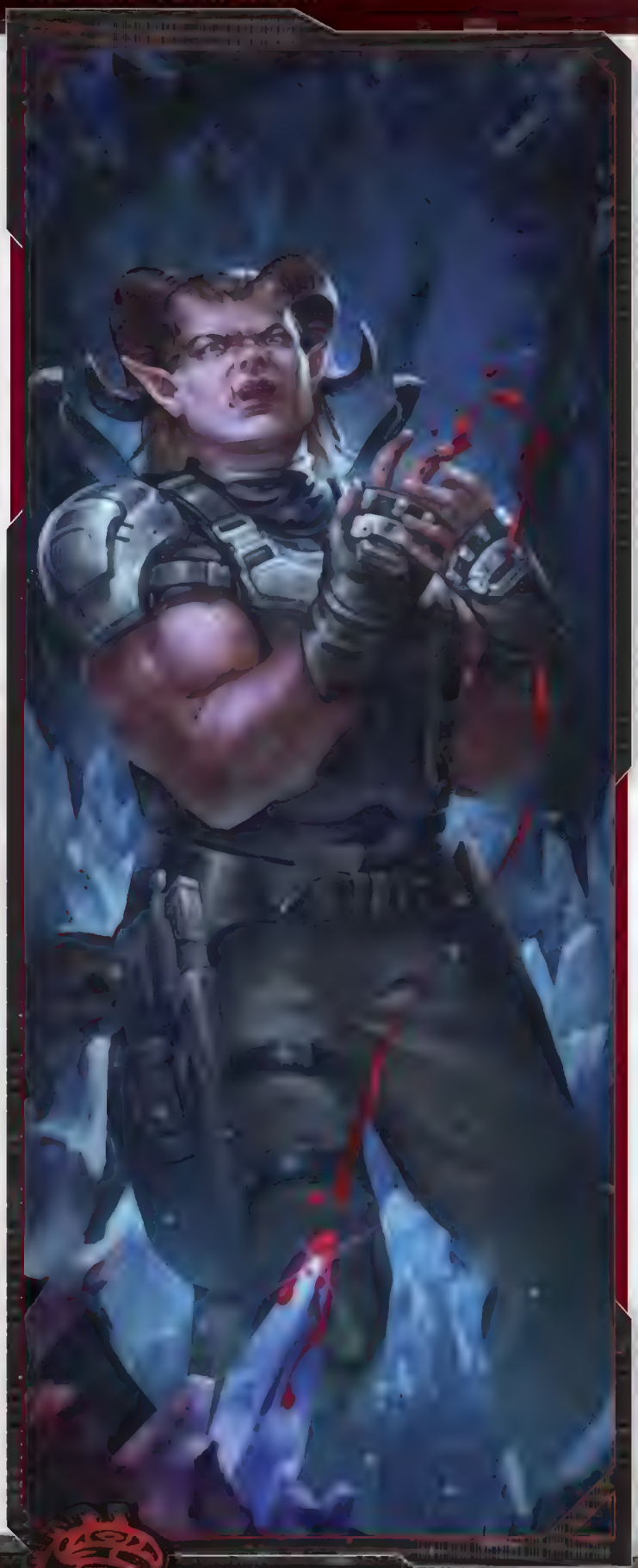
- I'm impressed at how comfortable G-Nome seemed to get with the visibility here. I've been there a few times, and I can never stay for long. The lack of proper sight wears me down, and my depth perception is poor. I always worry that I'm going to meet someone or something who is aggressive and more comfortable with the surroundings than I am, putting me at a severe disadvantage.
- Elijah

THE SHIMMERING DEATH

I have never spent so much time covered in bandages and hooked up to medkits as the times I have ventured into this place. The entire metaplane, including the cities, is covered in razor-sharp crystals.

"How do the locals survive?" you ask. Because everything, including the living residents, is crystal-based. Plants, animals, sentients, structures, and terrain are all composed of these razor-edged crystals, so they don't have anything to fear.

Along with the cuts and slivers, the crystals shatter into microfine particles and cause a series of unpleasant side effects depending on your level of protection. If you have no protection, the particles get in your lungs and eyes, piercing soft tissue in the lungs and scratching eyes to bloody redness before eventually scraping the lens and causing serious vision issues, including eventual blindness. Bleeding from your lungs and eyes is terrible but not the end. The microcrystals mix with saliva and



get swallowed. The crystals, all of them, have an interesting characteristic. They become "magnetic" when contacted by certain substances from another metaplane. They aren't attracted to metal, but rather other crystal pieces. Outside physical bodies, they slowly form an ever-thickening layer over any foreign material, lending their properties to the crystals they cover, allowing them to shatter and reform. They become tiny shards that seem to be able to slip past *anything*, and when they do, they reform, shredding whatever or whoever they penetrated from the inside out.

It's best to be agile and careful in this place.

Just to mention, I'm not sure if this is the home of the terrifying crystalline entity or just a place they may have corrupted, but it's something to keep in the back of your head while you're wandering around and trying not to break anything.

As you can probably guess, the payoff in this place is the crystals. The variety and value of the materials that can be gathered from this place are myriad. Each different creature has a different chemical makeup; some of these things have known uses and value here on our plane; others are unknown, with plenty of research labs eager to get their hands on them to see what uses they can devise.

From the elements I've seen, the crystals have the potential to make excellent reagents without a lot of refinement needed to get them to a higher state of power. They have an inherent channeling quality that makes them almost universal reagents. Several talismongers and artificers that I deal with have already contacted me about getting more of these crystals, because they also seem universally useful for enchanting foci, preparing homunculi, and a myriad of other arcane preps. This stuff has astonishing potential, both good and bad.

If you go, make sure you have a good clean room protocol when you return. I'm sure I still have hundreds of tiny crystal slivers that my body is trying to work out, and I haven't been back in a month.

As a safer collection method, I suggest visiting a settlement and acquiring a shard-blade. They're made from large crystals, which are hard to find in good condition. You'll need to wrap the handle a few times to protect your hand, but you can then use it to break and gather other crystals for awhile.

MCT has been interested, and I've heard of and run across Unit 13 members gathering crystals. They've got a method I don't approve of, but what can you expect from a megacorp? They roll in hard

with a kanmushi-style drone that goes all whirling dervish on everything in its path, then a second drone, like a massive earthmover, follows behind and scoops up the shattered remains. The first drone never makes it far before it gets scooped up too. They usually run several drone pairs through before something local comes at them hard.

I know the United Talismongers Association has been bugging me incessantly for intel on this place, and I've had several break-ins as well as getting my gear hacked at least once a week by folks seeking better data. Not that I keep that stuff on my link or home comm anyway. Metaplanar directions aren't exactly easy to type up.

- This plane is seriously deadly, which has led to some travel by exotic assassins. Get an unprepared traveler here, and they have a high chance of not surviving. So finding a way to direct people to the Shimmering Death can earn you some cash. If you have the know-how and lack of morals, you can earn a lot of cash.
- Haze

THE HUNTERS' REALM

There is no place in all the metaplanes that I have found that makes me understand where I truly sit in the food chain better than this place. Despite what all the rules of an ecological system tell us on Earth, this place lacks the lowest rungs. It exists as a place without standard prey. It's all predators, all the time. They vary in size from small lizard-cat things all the way to something I like to describe as a gorillasaurus rex—it has six arms, a thick leathery armored hide, and it's thirty meters tall. They all hunt each other and feed off one another until they are too large to be able to hunt enough food to survive. When the largest fail to get enough food, they die. And the smaller ones eat their remains.

Massive killing fields are scattered all over the realm, full of the bones of the dead being eaten by smaller scavengers. The fields also act as baited hunting grounds to draw other larger predators, and as you can guess, the cycle repeats at these places, drawing the biggest ones once they are hungry enough to step out into the open.

The rest of the metaplane is a vast wilderness full of forests, jungles, plains, and caverns where the various predators hunt any and everything they can, including any visitors to the plane. The place exists in a perpetual state of twilight, and any light source draws predators like a picnic draws ants. This has been the death of many a visitor to the metaplane, when they set up camp and get themselves surrounded by creatures that kill to live.

Predators aren't the only denizens of this realm. A local race of beings—I call them Huntsmen—have set up several hunting camps that they use to hunt local wildlife. The walls of their camps block out the small amount of light that they use inside

DEATH OF A THOUSAND CUTS

The danger of these crystals is the true horror story here. As mentioned above, broken crystals are razor-sharp and fracture further into smaller and smaller shards, but they always stay close to what broke them, regardless of what plane they came from. These tiny fragments slice and shred unarmored skin, but also penetrate armor and ventilation systems after enough time. The buildup also wraps a person in crystals, slowing them to an eventual death from cuts, asphyxiation, or starvation, in that order. It takes a powerful mind to hold still long enough to starve. Breaking shards that are already attached only makes it worse.

Here's how this nightmare works, rules-wise.

Moving safely through this metaplane requires an Agility (2) Test for walking, Agility (4) for running, and Agility (6) for sprinting. Tests should be made about once every ten minutes when on the move or as appropriate when changing rates of motion in combat.

Failure breaks a few crystals, causing Physical damage. The damage starts at 1P and is modified upward by two things. Increase the damage by the difference between the test threshold and the hits rolled on a failed test. This also becomes the new base damage for future tests as the crystal shards stick and accumulate. Also increase the starting damage by 1 for each subsequent failed test.

Second problem: The crystals eventually become focused at joints and make movement increasingly difficult without breaking them further and causing more potential harm. To represent this, the most recent Damage Value that was resisted against acts as a negative Agility modifier for calculation of movement. It doesn't change movement; it just means that movement above this lower number causes damage, so the afflicted individual must make another Damage Resistance Test.

Once the Damage Value exceeds the character's Agility attribute, it then gets compared to Strength + Agility until the Damage Value is higher than the combined attributes, at which point the shards have grown too thick, and movement is entirely hindered.

Crystals can continue to cause damage, even back at visitors' home plane, until they are removed with an Extended Medicine + Agility [Lower of Mental and Physical] (Last Damage Value, 30 minutes) Test.

Removing armor or clothing that has been covered in shards requires an Agility (Last Damage Value) Test, with a failure resulting in a Damage Resistance Test against (Last Damage Value – hits).

If the shards aren't removed the damage starts over again until they are.

in order to protect themselves and their guests when they operate hunting trips, which leads in nicely to my reasons to go there.

The main reason this place gets visitors is the challenge it offers. Spirits with a sick and twisted sense of humor offer a chance to hunt the most dangerous prey. While several trids and movies might think that's metahumans, they've got nothing on the things that stalk this place. The local creatures are smart—even the smallest is still able to stalk and outsmart most metahumans. The place is so deadly that many hunters never make it to the hunting camps and instead end up being killed while trying to make the trek. If you're lucky, the spirit that helps you get here (or the Dweller) will drop you into a camp, but most of the time you plop down on the outskirts or worse, somewhere random without instruction or directions on how to get to safety.

Getting dropped somewhere random leads to the next reason for visits here: accident. And not happy ones. Metaplanar travel isn't perfect, and sometimes a traveler opens a gateway while miscuing a symbol or using the wrong reagent. The Dweller doesn't care where you wanted to go; it doesn't offer course corrections, and travelers landing or being stranded in the wrong metaplane is not its concern. This happens with this metaplane more often than any other due to a mystic phenomenon known as *metaplanar polyjunction*, which results in a metaplanar dump off on this plane for almost any error that's made in a gateway ritual. It's almost certain death in these cases, with hapless individuals going to feed the local "energy" web.

Speaking of a death sentence, this metaplane has been used as a place of punishment for other metaplanes able to access it, which is most, thanks to the metaplanar polyjunction mentioned earlier. The Seelie Court uses this place to take care of troublemakers, along with at least four other civilized metaplanes. You'll find guards at the hunting camps from the various planes who are responsible for trying to identify criminals from their home metaplane and prevent them from using the camps to escape justice, which, as mentioned, tends to mean death. There is usually a set period of time that convicts need to survive in order to be considered cleared of their crime or having survived their sentence. A small mystic hourglass, often tattooed on individuals, is not only a way to determine who is a criminal but also shows how much time is left on their sentence.

Despite all these dangers and all the reasons you wouldn't want to go here or get sent, money can convince many to brave the dangers for a big payout. This metaplane offers an immeasurable volume of reagents, especially potent for shamanic combat spells, but more valuable are those substances gathered for several unique spells, poultices, and foci, specifically bone powders that can be used in potent weapon foci. These valuable reagents and artificing materials regularly cost runners their lives, but they also fill fat credsticks paid out to other expendable assets who manage to be skilled and lucky enough to survivea gathering/hunting expedition.

The thing about this place is that no one is going to tame it, and if they did the spot would immediately lose all its value. This place infuses things with the energies of combat and survival. Life and death. This means none of the megas are going to put the effort in for a big takeover, but almost every one of them has a handful of execs trying to make some profitable moves here.

But for us the big news isn't the megas, it's the United Talismongers Association. They don't have security assets to utilize on expeditions and instead rely heavily on runners to keep them safe in this place. Hit up fixers specializing in magic jobs to see if they can give you a chance to step into the big leagues and test your mettle.

- Not worth it. This place is the worst. There is no downtime. No safe haven. No civilization. Just things looking to prove they're the deadliest thing around.
- Mika

- On it.
- Kane

BEAUTIFUL DEATH

After only a few hours here, I wanted to stay here forever. That's against my character. I'm a wandering soul and have zero desire to lay down roots anywhere. At least, that was the way I felt until I rolled into this metaplane and found a place I truly felt at home and at peace.

The sky here is a perfect shade of blue, the grass a green like the lushest jungle. The flowers display every color in the spectrum and then some. Perfect walking paths lead you everywhere you want to go and allow you to stroll for eternity through the serene nature preserve. The forests have perfect glades with roots grown up like chairs

to lounge around on, and the trails open to ideal little clearings that would be perfect for a cute little hovel in the woods.

As you can probably guess, there's a dark side to all this. My desire to stay was not truly my own but a feeling induced by the eagle of peace, a flower with pollen that has a strong chemical effect blended with a bit of arcane influence. The eagle of peace is just one of the hundreds of similar Awakened plant species that can be found here, each one deadly in its own way. That's why I call the place Beautiful Death. Everything here can kill you in one way or another, and all of it will occur while you are surrounded by the most serene and picturesque setting you've ever seen. It's like a still-life version of the Hunters' Realm.

I've gone back several times, with proper protection, because this place is full of interesting denizens that occasionally find rifts and slip over into our plane and wreak havoc. The easiest way to figure out how to deal with them is to go to where they come from and see what they do in their native environment. Most of them are what I call "starvers." They pump their prey full of happy vibes, both chemically and magically induced, and then let them wander until they starve. The process also involves a chemical signal that keeps them coming back for more. It's the ultimate high before a slow, but remarkably painless, death.

There are several plants that do attack their prey. Some inject a venom, others seek to hold and constrict. Several of the constrictors aren't strong enough to kill with their constriction but easily hold prey long enough to make them part of the "starver" club, but without the euphoria before death. Every species here is visually appealing in some way to draw prey close. Based on my findings, this prey supply consists purely of metaplanar visitors. Whether this is due to the plant-life becoming too good at what it does or if there were none in the first place is my next research project here. I'll likely include some venom gathering while I'm there to help fund the expedition.

A few of these species have become permanent residents on our plane thanks to the efforts of Aztechnology to cultivate the Awakened plants for their unique arcanobiochemical properties. Some are even in use as security precautions with some unpleasant side effects that no medkit or even a doctor is going to know what to do about. The answers will all be available on its native metaplane, but not everyone has that kind of access.

THE MAD PLANE

This place is best experienced rather than described, but I'll do my best.

Complete and utter chaos, with nonsense going on at all times. It is constant sensory overload from every direction and sense all at once. Trying to even have conversations with people who are with you is a challenge what with all the noises, lights, flying objects, random scents being ejected from the objects and lights. There's also a thickness to the air that stimulates your tastebuds, rarely in a pleasant way, keeping one in a constant state of distraction.

While the activity in the realm is utter chaos, it's the landscape that most visitors are there for, and that stays constant even when being bombarded by, say, chaotic swirls of flying fudgsicles that burn like acid when they touch things. Just one example of the many moments of madness you may encounter while trying to explore the ruins of this ancient realm that draws visitors seeking ancient arcane secrets or a glimpse at a history long forgotten by all but the ageless elves and dragons.

The ruins are laid out in three distinct rings: the Outer Village, the Inner Market, and the Castle in the center. Each ring had its own apparent purpose, and attempts have been made to map them, but with all the chaotic nonsense going on, keeping things straight is far more difficult than one might imagine. Too much interference.

When exploring, you always arrive at the main gate. When you look around, you'll see that the gate is closed and you're inside a short tunnel formed by the walls and upper floors of the gatehouse. This four-meter-by-six-meter sanctuary of sanity is the last bit of normalcy you're going to experience. From here you can look out, but all you see is the chaos occupying the main road into the center of the realm and the main wall and a small portion of the castle ahead. Personally, I find this a point of amusement. There are no chaotic effects going on here, so it's peaceful and safe, but you can watch vast amounts of craziness occur while you're safely tucked away.

Eventually you'll need to step out into the excitement, and that's where it gets hard to describe. The first ring is referred to as the Outer Village. The entire Outer Village consists of square buildings, each two or three stories tall. Four streets describe concentric circles within the Outer Village ring, dividing the buildings into great circular rows. The outermost row, by the gate, is only a single building deep. So is the innermost row, which backs up

to the wall of the next ring. In between, buildings are arranged in back-to-back blocks.

Within the Outer Village you'll find homes, pubs, inns, food storage, barracks, and armories. There are a lot of buildings, and they haven't all been looked at because this place is overly large and has the most frequent spurts of chaos. There are supposedly a number of homes that belonged to some very powerful mages. They look normal on the outside, but inside are some kind of pocket realms. Rumors have them hundreds of times larger than the small buildings they appear to be. They're obviously sought after for potential arcane secrets as well as foci and artifacts.

Within the outer ring, the Outer Village, is the next ring, which I call the Inner Market. The chaos drops in frequency but increases in violence and danger here. The ring divides into three streets, similar in appearance to the Outer Village, but most the structures are only one or two stories. Most with some form of open-air booth or sitting area near the front; some have the same on a second story, especially former eating establishments. The outermost row of buildings backs up to the wall between the Inner Market and the Outer Village, while the innermost row backs up to the Castle wall. In between is a double row of buildings with a narrow, jagged alley between them, making it different from the Outer Village.

Everything along these streets appears to have been a shop, restaurant, or service offering (such as a brothel or merc shop). Plenty of merchandise was left behind, some of it truly valuable, but touching anything in this place kicks off the chaos, and here that tends to be far more painful than funny. It's also hard to protect against, because the magic here messes with everything. I had a merc with me who rocked that milspec body armor, the stuff that bounces most standard ammo, and he was in a shop full of weapons. They were gorgeously crafted, and he wanted one for home, so he picked it up. A dozen other blades floated up and ran him through. He looked like a magician's sword box, minus the beautiful assistant and with a lot more blood. Blades that would normally do nothing to this armor without a troll behind them slipped through it like it was butter. Be warned.

The innermost ring contains the Castle. It has a name, and someone might tell it to you while you are there, but part of the magic of the place makes it impossible to remember the name after you've left. It's also part of what makes it tough to find anything here on a second visit, as your memories are fuzzy, mismatched, or missing once you return. From what I understand, it's part of the place's protection from "something," but I don't know exactly what. Maybe I figured it out there and forgot, or maybe my return trips will reveal more.

As for the Castle, it's huge. Its main grounds are held within a central ring of wall about four hundred meters across. The place is too complex and vast to describe in much detail, and it also serves as the heart of the mind-altering effect. I wrote that four-hundred-meter note on my own skin while I was there, along with a map to a library I enjoyed immensely. The overall design of the Castle has an interesting architectural flavor that seems to cross the concentric designs of Europe with Mesoamerican elements thrown in, and if I recall correctly (which is a big "if" in this place), at least one area with Japanese pagoda-style towers. There are probably a hundred towers or more in this place, along with internal structures that range from four stories along (and within) the outer walls up to twenty or more stories within the inner structures. And that doesn't count the subterranean levels, which include laboratories, dungeons, libraries, living quarters, and cisterns.

One note about those lower levels is that the memory effect and the chaos are both weakened, but the place is inhabited by creatures of shadow that feed on fear and pain. They possess abilities shared by many of this plane's native species, including the power to induce a fear response or cause a compulsion of some kind.

I've mentioned that this place has a lot of craziness and chaos, and a lot of it is pretty funny. Flying cream pies suddenly bombarding someone is quite the sight. But when those same pies crash down on someone and they are suddenly being burnt by acid, it's not so funny. That's the worst part of all of this—you can't tell the difference between what's harmless and what's deadly.

Take this all to mean that this place is difficult to travel but full of great arcane opportunities and unique information.

But why go here? A chance to gather artifacts and information, to study unique spell effects with no caster, to investigate the strange invasive presence, and, well, just because there have to be mysteries and valuables hidden in a place that so actively defends itself.

I went at first to study a few of the local creatures. We call them spelleater cats. At first they

were thought to be an Awakened domestic feline, but a physical study showed some abnormalities. I tracked their origin to a location in the Southern Caucasus region and a rift that opened with the new moon. Beyond was this place. The cats survive here by canceling the spell effects directed at them, which is an ability several corps would love to recreate in other species or put in a location so that magic could be lessened without having to damage the mana of an area.

I've returned to learn more about the cats, but also to dig into what this place was, how the memory-muddling effect works, and whether it can be countered or overcome in any way. I've tried recording, but everything comes up chaos, as if it's attracted to the recording device.

Thanks to the effects and some of the interesting critters in this place, there are a few corps looking to boost their arcane bottom line, but very few of their teams manage to get far. Being raised in the controlled environment of a corp doesn't create the best minds for dealing with a place like this. They've even sent mercs along to help, but they aren't equipped for the level of insanity this place has to offer. More innovative assets are probably their next option, which is why I'm here telling you about this spot. If you get a job offer, negotiate from a place of knowledge that this realm kills visitors often and in unexpected ways. Get a baseline pay rate for just making the trip, and don't let all the pay be contingent on acquisitions, because you may need to bail fast if the place is in a killing mood.

- Corps want to train cats as security animals, huh? Good luck!
- Slamm-0!

- Don't need to train them. Just put them in a cage in the right place.
- Lyran

- Right. Because wild cats with abilities we don't fully understand really like to be contained.
- Ma'Fan

ID

The Metaplane of Man has a flipside of darker intent. Dig far enough down or find an "Edge," and you can fall up to the Id. There's no logic to find this side of the metaplane; most just get lost down some alley and come out in one of Id's cities. Like the rest of the metaplane, it's a manifestation of man's thinking—hence the name—with a particular focus on our instinctive, uninhibited desires. Chaos reigns the land, as warlords fight each other in a constant power struggle. The people here are extremely impulsive. They might fly off the handle at the flap of a butterfly wing, start building a monument to pay tribute to whoever brought them dinner (only to abandon it a few hours in), or become inflicted with wanderlust at the sight of sunrise. These behaviors are not unknown on the Metaplane of Man, but they're worse in Id, which is a sinkhole with kernels of mankind's malevolence spurring a growth of like-minded evil in the landscape.

The architecture of Id is based on strong emotions. Avarice and fear create permanent places. Cemeteries and battlefields are the most common of these, enduring as the times and people change. Great cities such as Bethlem are out there, too, with dim lights emphasizing their shadows. But there are also the bright illuminations and haunting music of Illicitatum. Bethlem can take the existing civilization in; a rough sanctuary if they learn the ropes, a prison if they can't. Lost/traveling spirits tend to congregate more in Illicitatum, like moths drawn to a flame. Illicitatum "entertainment" draws a person in and does not let them leave, offering sweets and promises in exchange for youth and memories. Some of the few metahumans who have escaped Illicitatum know nothing about themselves other than their name and how to hum the snatches of melody that overwhelm any other thoughts.

- Id can be said to be a living world. It slowly works its way into a traveler's mind, leveraging fears and desires until the person doesn't want to leave. When their corporeal body dies, the person is absorbed by the metaplane.
- Frosty

- Already with the ghost stories?
- Snopes

- Laugh if you want. I don't remember any of your exploits to the Id.
- Frosty

- I'll admit the Id is dangerous—heck, all the metaplanes can be dangerous. But it is not as bad as, say, the Hunters' Realm, because the denizens are disorganized and can't always sustain any particular effort. It's easy to make people there mad, but it's almost as easy to distract them from their anger.
- Haze

- That's not wrong, but it undersells the danger. Yeah, you might not get anyone stalking you for days and days seeking vengeance, but then you might get someone hurling a fireball into the room you're in just because they stubbed their toe and are mad. The unpredictability is incredibly risky.
- Elijah

The city of Bethlem is a cancerous urban growth, spawned from twenty-first-century vices and strengths. Twisted skyrakers tower over decomposing barrens. Bethlem is the most common arrival destination in the Id. Inattentive travelers who take the wrong bus, the wrong train, or simply fail to enunciate their destination properly, invariably end up here. Bethlem can be considered a "free" city, as none of the warlords want to deal with the rebellious nature of its citizens. One small consolation of the city are the moments of beauty and silence that can be found when the malice and mayhem cancel each other out.

Toward the heart of the city is the library of Engh. The stone structure is partially sunk in a quagmire of trash, looking as if it has been squeezed out by other towering buildings. Inside the library are floor-to-ceiling stacks of chaotically organized books and empty shelves. Presumably the librarian collected the books but didn't know how to organize them. The librarian is nowhere to be found, but his personal writings are. A dozen or so journals can be found, describing his or her travels in this metaplane. The writings employ a more modern verbiage, but other than the name and the fact that the author is an Awakened traveler, no one has tied it to a specific person or time period. Nonetheless, the writings have provided useful insights for navigating the Metaplane of Man.

- I've found spell formulas in one of the journals, variants of Turn to Goo and Petrify. I hope to find more spellbooks in the library, hopefully including currently unknown formulae. Or at least, unknown to me.
- Frosty

- The contents can provide insight, but its existence only can offer more questions.
- Man-of-Many-Names

The City of Illicitatum is a carnival town, an exaggerated Las Vegas, bloated with lies and illusions. Towering hotels with twisting rollercoasters arch over a festival of colored tents. It lies on a vast flat plain, allowing anyone to see the lights or the brightly colored flags for many kilometers. There are many forms of fascination and fetishes to be found within, illuminated by the sickly yellow bulbs stuck everywhere. Lotus-eaters offer fruits and wine to weary travelers who found the city in the darkness. The concierge, a dark, slender man, directs people to what they want, not necessarily what they need. Show girls here, a card game there, BTLs made way out yonder. Don't expect to pay with conventional currency; prices come more in terms of time or thoughts. Prices start out small: One day out of your life, or a memory of what you had for breakfast. But they grow. People can rack up debts trying to get what they need, losing years of life, or the knowledge of loved ones. Some who realize what they lost don't bother to return. Others stay, unaware of how much of themselves has flowed away.

One of the more known locations in the Id is the Shantor Mines. Within a rugged mountain range just above a secluded valley, the Shantor family dug extensive tunnels into the surrounding peaks. Generations have pulled out countless raw materials, building family wealth. They kept digging further, creating a network of tunnels beneath the valley. Some disputes between family members occurred, and family clans formed, all of them tied to the mountain peak that their ancestors first excavated. With conflict and greed, death was inevitable. That death was followed by the arrival of Lethwellian priests.

These priests descended from higher in the mountains, where they had a secluded monastery that was not friendly to visitors. The priests were the embodiment of humanity's ritualistic belief in death and preparation of the deceased. Their appearance resembled mummified corpses dressed in saffron robes. They silently took their place in burying the dead within the mines. Then more of them arrived. With mortar and magic, they built intricate catacombs deep in the labyrinth of tunnels. A second monastery was constructed in the valley so that the priests could protect the catacombs from desecration. At this point, at least one hundred generations of the Shantor family have been buried below, with more to come as the squabbles continue. The priests are stalwart and cannot be bribed or tortured to reveal the safe path through the catacombs. Their magic is also quite powerful. In death, those who have fallen in the fights in and near the mines are drawn to the catacombs to become part of it.

Members of the Shantor family are known to be miserly with their treasures. They often request that the priests bury them with their belongings; some go so far as to be interred even before death to make sure their wishes are followed. Artifacts and treasure circulate as the Shantor descendants delve the depths for their inheritance. So much effort goes into getting into the mines and catacombs that a shanty town has been built in the valley by various entities from the Metaplane of Man. It sits as a sprawling community of more than a thousand spirits all feeling the fever of greed. In recent years, mining activity has slowed dramatically, as the current members of the Shantor family know just how much wealth is hidden in the catacombs, so they're not too worried about extracting more.

- Careful of making deals with those from the Id side—they're always looking for metahumans to go spelunking in the catacombs. Also take note that there have been a few astral shanghais in the Balkans linked to the Shantor family.
- Chainmaker

Many occultists know of the Four Aquinas's Vaults, if not the actual location of any of them. Thomas Aquinas and the Templar Knights were said to have gathered various magical items and books that they deemed too dangerous for humanity to use. Aquinas then designed and created the vaults to obscure and protect the items within. Newly circulated is the Tenebris Libre, a thirteenth-century book that was supposedly uncovered in a dig of an Italian crypt. It describes a three-meter-by-three-meter cube of marble, hollowed out and wrapped in ornate iron and gold with a thick iron door. While the other vaults are described as being much larger and possibly hidden within various architectural wonders around the world, this vault is referred to as the Fifth Vault, or the Traveling Vault.

- That can't be easy to move. How many tons would it be?
- Traveler Jones

- The book doesn't mention how it was moved, only that it left Jerusalem before the end of the crusades. Even back in the day, people didn't like to share their tricks.
- Fianchetto

The Fifth Vault is said to contain a few relics so dangerous that they could not be kept on earth for fear of discovery. Relics that can cause global effects, if the writer is to be believed. As to where it could have been hidden, it is now believed to have been moved to the Id through ritual magic. An artist rendition of the vault gives some clues to what it looks like and of its location, but no one is sure that the artist didn't just add flair to his picture.

- So the most dangerous of items have been somehow moved to a metaplane. Would this be like a reversed alchera? Now you have me curious if this is possible.
- Winterhawk

HUDSON VALLEY

Along the Hudson River, in the Hudson Valley, there is a thinning of the barrier between the astral plane and the material world. Here, the towns of Esopus, Poughkeepsie, and Newburgh lie along a unique ley line that also serves as an intersection of metaplanes. Ancient astral gateways to different locations now reside hidden in parks, cemeteries, and the occasional shopping mall. This ley line has many nicknames: Psychic Highway, Burned-Over District, and Western New York Metaplanar Nexus, to name a few. The line stretches along the length of the river, but wanders back and forth, undecided as to which side of the river to settle on.

On the flipside of this ley line is a kaleidoscope of metaplanar collisions. A thin veil weaves its way along the line like a patchwork quilt of unique landscapes. A sun rises over an ethereal cloud fortress of the empress in the Metaplane of Air, just a stone's throw across the veil to a sand-dune sea with ships sailing in the Metaplane of Earth. The depths of the Metaplane of Water, inhabited by undines, tint the light of falling embers in the ash wastes of the Metaplane of Fire. The list of metaplanes and associated hyper metaplanes chained to this nexus is lengthy. For a time, though, the nexus connected known planes, never delving into the deeper metaplanes.

The relative center of this quilt, or more likely the agreed-upon hub of this nexus, is a collection of hyper metaplanes of man that have significant historical connection to Hudson Valley. It is the point where connections to the physical world are the thinnest. At this center, many of the metaplanes have formed a sort of governing body to cover this area of shared interest, a group known as the Council of Seven. As you might guess, one member from each metaplane sits on the council, and there is usually some jockeying among the spirits for this position. Those Awakened who wish to use the Hudson Valley to travel should get permission or register with the council. That way they will be in the council's good graces in case there's a problem. It's best not to surprise these things; you don't want them to be jumpy.

There is a town called Penn-Yan in the Metaplane of Man that has the appearance of a nineteenth-century Dutch colony, where the intersection has formed a cultural melting pot of spirits as they cross through to other destinations. Homes vary in style and color, giving the place a prismatic overlay. The town square is a daily marketplace, awash with a plethora of trade goods. Spirits come to shop here for items that they have trouble finding anyplace else. Traveling spirits are often especially interested in finding items from their home metaplanes, either for sentimental value or to give them a little boost by strengthening their connection to home. Other trade here is of information, and travel guides are often hired in town. The Pertwee Inn has a dozen or so spirits who can be hired as translators or tour guides. In any given day, there are hundreds of travelers on the Psychic Highway, and many of them believe that hiring a guide is the easiest way to travel. The Pertwee Inn itself has doors to metaplanes other than the one to Penn-Yan, so be careful when leaving via the back exit, and don't go through the root cellar.

- Penn-Yan has followed the pattern set by Crossroads with regards to how trade works. There's even a shortcut from Penn-Yan to Crossroads by way of the Mid-Hudson Bridge.
- Traveler Jones

- The Council of Seven have some laws used to ban some places or things they believe would disrupt trade or harm people. There is a strong ban against traveling to the

shadow metaplane. Hudson Valley has at least one known gate, and it's been warded by the council to prevent anything from coming in or out.

- Frosty

- Many young Awakened have migrated to the Hudson Valley area to take advantage of the astral gateways. Bunch of lazy sots who don't want to deal with the Dweller on the Threshold.
- Haze

- Who wants to deal with the Dweller all the time?
- Winterhawk

After the Yellowstone incident, this ley line has become more unstable. Those who travel interstate 9 or 9W are cautioned to watch for signs, as there have been random manifestations of astral and metaplanar gateways. Watcher spirits have been posted in various locations to alert any drivers of any astral hazards (gateways, alchera, etc.). Law enforcement have also had their hands full with various lost spirits running around, which is not a normal sight. The last time this was seen was the astral rift in DeeCee, only that was isolated to one rift. Here, you have five hundred kilometers of possible chaos. The rumored sightings of ghasts have security bodies throughout the area on high alert and offering bounties on spirits should they be found. Penn-Yan has been chaotic, and spirits have noticed that the gates are not where they should be, or they lead to the wrong location. Combine that confusion with bounty hunters roaming the territory, and things have become increasingly chaotic.

- The Pertwee Inn has gotten crowded. In addition to spirit guides, there are also bodyguards and metaplanar bounty hunters for hire. It's not just metahumans who take advantage of this situation, either. The Karmic bounty on shades has drawn even the Unseelie Court's attention.
- Elijah

Unusual metaplanar quakes have been occurring since the Yellowstone event. These quakes are not felt just in one metaplane, but across several planes at once. Associated with the quakes are rifts in the thin veil, accompanied by short bursts of energy that can boil nearby metaplanar oceans or melt earthbound marls into glass. Fortunately, they are short and inconsistent.

Taking advantage of this chaos are the shedim. Unable to get back to their own metaplane, they have been searching the Hudson Valley for any new gateways. Once-quiet towns in the area are finding morgues missing loved ones and scary congregations of corpses (moving and not) deep in the woods along the river. This comes with an increased risk of disease, as corpses are indiscriminately left around the valley watershed.

- They're coming to get you Barbara ...
- Slamm-0!

Also in the midst are corporations investing in manatech. The Yellowstone incident has done more than destabilize a few gateways; the edges between metaplanes are widening into rifts. Great amounts of mana energy, some converted on the material world, come through like geysers. Mansion Square Park in Poughkeepsie routinely spouts everything from gamma radiation to gouts of fire. Wuxing has drawn ritual circles around the park to draw the energy into what can only be surmised is some kind of large battery.

- Wuxing has parked two large semi-trucks in the parking lot, and cables are woven into the center of the park. What energy they are pulling from the rift is anyone's guess, but sucking energy across planes has kept growing as an area of corporate interest. Right, Elijah?
- Frosty

- Yeah, didn't think he'd respond.
- Frosty

They're not the only ones. There are a couple of other places where you have some suspicious activity. To the north, someone set up an electrical transformer on the banks of the river and put a couple of drones around to guard it. In several towns, what appear to be wireless communication towers are popping up. These towers don't appear to be transmitting anything. With all the activity drawing that power, the news has been spun that it is relieving the problem before it gets worse, relating it to a safety vent so we don't have another Yellowstone. Not everyone believes that. Some say that the draw is analogous to pulling too much water from an aquifer without allowing it to replenish. Sooner or later, it will collapse. What that means astrally, who can say?

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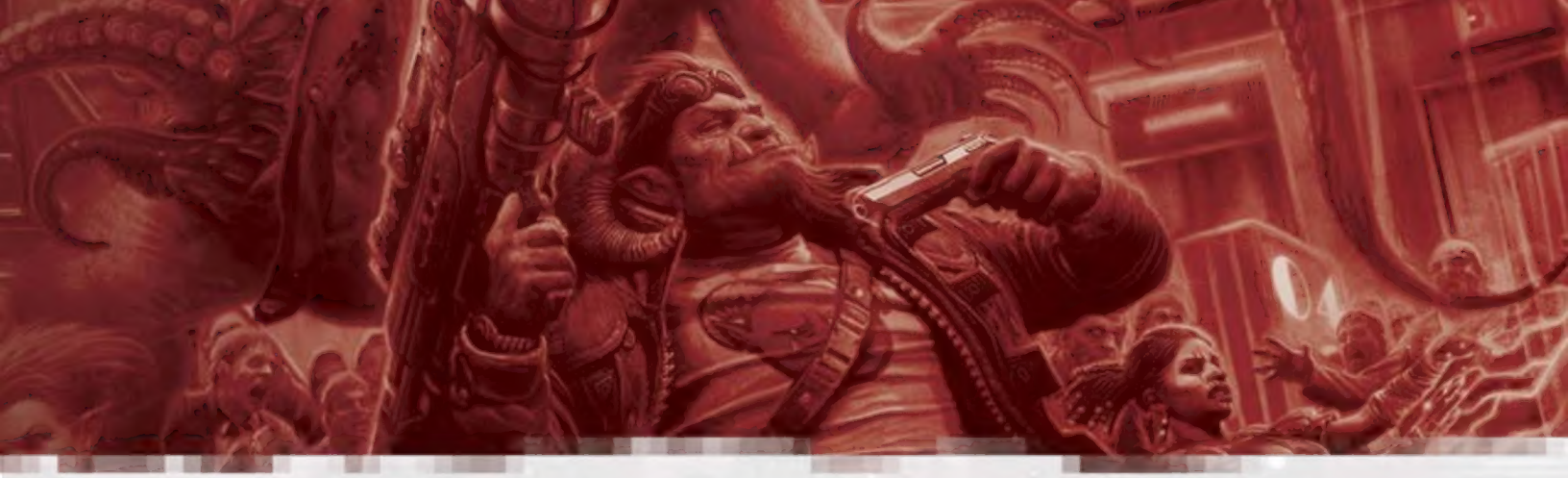

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EXIT
FIN

PIERCING THE NIGHT

You heard the scream. It's important to remember that. Sometimes, when it's late, and you hear something that sounds like a scream echoing through dark alleys, you try to convince yourself that it was something else. An animal. An illusion. Anything but what it sounded like.

But it was a scream. You heard it, and you'll hear it again, because in the Sixth World, the supply of terror is growing. Bug spirits work to devour corporations from within. Shedim claim dead bodies and mobilize to their own dark ends. And the hidden corners of the metaplanes and the Matrix contain creatures that are best not imagined, because to imagine them is to sever ties with reason.

Dark Terrors is a catalog of the horrors lurking under the surface of the Sixth World. With plot updates and hooks, critter stats, and campaign information presented in an immersive style, it's an invaluable resource for players ready to stay on the edge of their seats. It is for use with *Shadowrun, Fifth Edition* and *Shadowrun: Anarchy*.

SHADOWRUN
FIFTH EDITION

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